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MEETING THE PRESS

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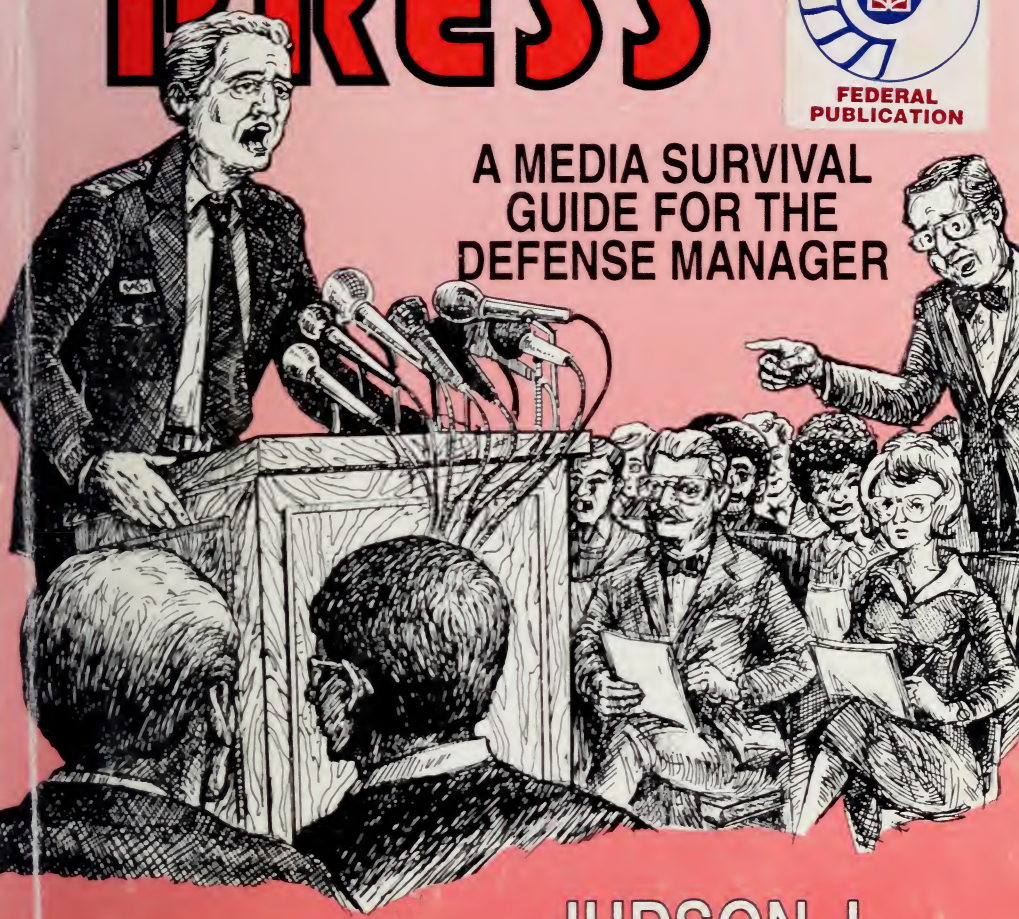
A MEDIA SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR THE DEFENSE MANAGER



JUDSON J. CONNER

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Meeting the Press: A Media Survival Guide for the Defense Manager

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Meeting the Press: A Media Survival Guide for the Defense Manager

by

Judson Conner

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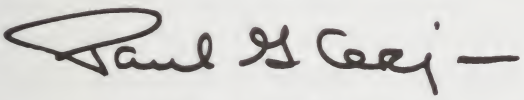
Foreword

In our democratic system, public servants have to "meet the press" from time to time as part of their responsibilities. Freedom of the press is, of course, one of the freedoms everyone in the Department of Defense is sworn to protect, but it can translate into an unpleasant experience for any defense manager unprepared for the encounter. The public official who relies on luck, intuition, and charm may be in for a rude awakening in a stressful, perhaps adversarial, brush with the media.

Prudent defense managers count among their executive skills the ability to communicate effectively with members of the public media. This guide offers practical advice for building healthy media relations. It should prove especially useful for managers who are neophytes in dealing with the media. Representing the reflective wisdom of a former military officer with many years of press experience, it guides the reader through the standard interview, the fast-breaking news ambush, the television spot, and other encounters. Written in plain English and laced with humor, anecdotes, tips, and check lists, the guide is as "user friendly" as the morning paper itself.

Meeting the Press identifies the pressures of the trade which influence reporters and discusses the irritants and pitfalls that are part and parcel of military-media relations. By understanding the media's right to freedom of inquiry, military and civilian officials alike will be better prepared to meet the press when necessary as part of their mission.



PAUL G. CERJAN
Lieutenant General, US Army
President, National Defense University

Introduction

Government officials traveling the road of public service increasingly find themselves under the watchful eyes of the public media. The attention can be confusing, since the media represent a frustrating mixed bag of opportunity and grief. Ever ready to criticize, condemn, abuse, and send careers spiraling downward, these same organs of information can applaud, congratulate, sing praises, and carry careers onward and upward.

As public servants, military and civilian alike, rise in rank and responsibility, their vulnerability to media criticism increases, but so too does the opportunity to work with the media. It is simply a case of avoiding the one and embracing the other. But this is easier said than done. Job competence is important, luck plays a part, but mostly it is a question of applying acquired skills. Realizing this, the successful public executive develops and maintains among his professional tools the ability to deal effectively with the public media. An effective media relationship, the smart executive soon realizes, can be career enhancing as well.

This development normally takes the form of a self-taught course, and perhaps this is as it should be. Press communication skills are not the ones needed to lead troops, administer programs, navigate ships, or manage resources. Thus, military schools, and civilian management courses too, tend to relegate press relations to the nice-to-know-but-not-really-essential category. The subject, if addressed at all, is traditionally

left to visiting reporters, whose lectures are frequently interesting but seldom responsive to the real world needs of the audience. But this approach saves time and carries the additional benefit of avoiding the far-fetched but frightening accusation that the government is teaching its personnel how to manipulate the press, a crime which ranks, in the eyes of the media, right up there with murder and mayhem.

So, the defense manager is left on his or her own to develop media survival skills.

This book is designed to help you, the military or civilian defense official who fits this bill.

It will not make you an instant television celebrity, nor will it shield you from the barbs of press criticism. But it will help you to deal with that criticism, assist you in the building of a good public image, and serve as a guide for developing media communication skills. Perhaps most important of all, it seeks to enhance your self-confidence as you travel that media-lined road of public service.

Meeting the Press: A Media Survival Guide for the Defense Manager

Chapter I
That First Link

The Reporter

The key to media relations is the reporter. He (or she) is known by various names—reporter, correspondent, journalist, columnist or, in the case of the electronic media, commentator, reporter, or anchor. Whatever his name, he is that first link in the media chain, the individual who asks the questions and interprets the answers.

We have a tendency to stereotype reporters. We may think of them as suave individuals in trench coats living glamorous lives or see them as unsavory manipulators. They have been lauded as fearless defenders of democracy and reviled as blights on the face of society. General Sherman considered them all spies. Alexis de Tocqueville characterized them as having "a scanty education and a vulgar turn of mind." Hollywood is much kinder. American presidents have praised them and reviled them—almost in the same breath.

In reality, reporters defy categorization. They come in all shapes and sizes, exhibit a wide divergence of traits and characteristics, bring to their trade a vast range of experience and background, and appear on the "likability scale" all the way from Will Rogers to Attila the Hun. All this makes them difficult to pin down for closer examination. Fortunately, however, they share certain characteristics and goals; and as they ply their trade, they are buffeted by identifiable pressures which lead them to act in certain ways in certain situations. A knowledge of these pressures and goals not only provides us with an understanding of reporters, but also

furnishes a blueprint for building a solid structure of good media relations.

Consider first the one characteristic shared by all reporters: THEY ARE ALL HUMAN.

This is not a particularly startling revelation, to be sure, but it is important because it is often overlooked. Reporters get tired and hungry and cold and irritable—just as we do. They respond to consideration just like everyone else. Cooperate with them, and they will cooperate with you. Kick them in the shins, and they kick back—hard. A great many of the things reporters do are easily predictable, not because they are reporters, but simply because they are human.

Being human, the majority of reporters have discovered more information is forthcoming if they are friendly and congenial. You will find most of them nice to know, interesting, intelligent people who share many of your values and beliefs. But always remember, their goals and loyalties are different from yours. They have a different job to do, and they march to a quite different drummer.

Loyalty. Ask any reporter worth his salt where his loyalty lies and he will tell you, "with the great American public." But this is an oversimplified response. In reality his loyalty lies with the one who hires him and fires him, recommends or denies him raises in salary, the one who praises him and chews him out. And this is the editor—or in the case of the electronic media, the news director or manager.

Now the editor, on the other hand, is very much attuned to the public, but his "public" can be a very narrow portion of that great American variety. His public is made up of the people who buy his publication or tune in to his particular channel. He seeks to please them, caters to their whims, and he deviates from their expectations only at the peril of his job. And it is he, this editor or news manager, who tells the reporter what to seek and how to treat it once he obtains it.

These happy circumstances of the journalistic world play directly into your hands, because they provide you a readily available source of information to assist you in preparing to deal with any given reporter. Simply read the journal he is writing for and, if possible, some material written by him. It will tell you what he will be looking for, the probable questions he will ask, and what he will do with the material when he gets it. In the case of the freelance writer, a review of his writing is not as important as the publication for which he is doing the interview. A good freelancer adapts; publications remain stable. For television, the same information is obtained by viewing the program on which you are to appear—a fact which appears to have escaped a number of public officials.

Mission. Having cleared up the question of reporter loyalty and turned it to our advantage, we next consider his goal or mission. What is he seeking? The answer is simple: a story. He is not trying to make you look bad. He is not trying to make you look good either. He is

simply trying to get a story. And if there is a story breaking within your area of responsibility, he is going to get a story whether you cooperate with him or not. Your ability to deal with the press has little effect on whether or not a story is reported, but your ability in this regard has a great deal to do with how you LOOK in that story. It also has a lot to do with the accuracy of the story and the treatment of the story by the media.

Here it should be noted that no matter how great your skill at dealing with the press, you cannot expect to always come out smelling like a rose. There are times when circumstances are so damaging, fate so fickle, that there is no way you are going to look good. In these cases it is not a question of trying to smell like a rose, but

rather of keeping from smelling like a sewer. And those same skills, which in times of achievement enhance your image, will ease the damage when things turn sour. But you have to make the effort. It is not easy, since in times of crises when the forces of perversity and evil come crashing down around your ears, all the instincts of preservation tell you to hide, clam up, stonewall the media. At such times, remember the ostrich. He may hide his head in the proverbial sand, but his rear end remains highly visible. The press makes short work of rear ends waving in the breeze.

Pressures of the Trade

Numerous pressures impact upon the reporter pursuing his trade. Some work for you, some against you. But whether they are pro or con from your point of view, a knowledge of their existence can only assist your efforts.

Accuracy. Take for example the reporter's quest for accuracy. Contrary to popular opinion, reporters try very hard to be accurate. Their editors demand it. It is a question of pride, professionalism, and (above all) economics. A publication which is wrong too often begins to lose readers, and the guilty editor loses his job. Thus, editors require reporters to check their facts. Rarely will a one-source story get into print, unless there is no way to check its authenticity.

The editor's requirement to check the facts works in your favor, because the simplest and quickest way for a reporter to check a story originating in your area of responsibility is to query you. (In practice he calls your information officer, who answers on your behalf.) Thus, you get a chance to kill the story if it is false or to tell your version if it is true. And your version is important. It will not necessarily be the total story reported, but at least it will appear in the story; and, when official reports of an event are contradicted by other versions,

the average reader tends to go along with the authorities. And remember this: no matter how embarrassing or damaging a news event might be, your version of it (truthful and straightforward) is never as bad as the same story pieced together from various other sources. Common sense and military policy dictate that you should answer press queries fully and accurately, even when those answers tend to make you look bad. But human nature advises otherwise, and it is often difficult to choke back the impulse to evade the hard questions. This impulse can really do you in, for evasions always come back to haunt, and they are malevolent ghosts.

A "no comment" can be equally damaging. The reporter will probably quote you in the story, not only to let the public (and his editor) know that he offered you a chance to tell your side, but also to let everyone know you are guilty. The dictionary tells us that "no comment" merely means you prefer not to talk about the subject, but the readers know better. They know very well you are pleading the Fifth Amendment to cover up your incompetence.

There are limits to what the reporter is expected to check on. If he himself has witnessed an occurrence, obviously he will not check back with authorities to supplement his report of the event. Just as obviously, he is not expected to verify information you have provided him in an interview. Yet, strangely enough, he sometimes does just this; and if he ever does, BEWARE!

A reporter checking back after an interview will normally explain he wants to be sure he is quoting you correctly in the story. He then reads what he has you saying and waits for your comment. There is always the chance this is all there is to it: a double checking by the reporter to make sure he quotes you correctly. BUT he could be calling you because he realizes what you have said is tantamount to committing professional suicide, and he is giving you one last chance to recant. The goodness in his heart is almost never great enough to come right out and point to the danger, but it is frequently

sufficient to offer that one last chance. Be sure and take advantage of it. LISTEN CAREFULLY to what he has you saying, and whether you actually said it or not; if it is not what you want to be quoted as saying, tell him so. "If I said that, it certainly isn't what I meant to say. What I meant to say was . . . . " This offer of a second chance is also offered in television interviews on occasion. A national television audience was treated to an example of it during the Ford-Carter presidential election debate when President Ford got Poland on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain. The interviewer called attention to the slip and gave him a chance to retract. He failed to do so, but at least he had the chance.

Timeliness. Among the demands impinging upon the reporter, timeliness is closely associated with accuracy. Obviously, the more time one has to gather and weigh the facts, the more complete and accurate will be the story. The two factors are always in conflict, and when it comes to the final bell, timeliness is always the winner. Deadlines dominate the business of disseminating news and bring pressure, stress, and frustration to the process. Deadlines separate great reporters from great writers, cause media ulcers, and provoke great anger under certain circumstances. They are also the source of multiple headaches among military information officers.

For some reason, the most decisive of military minds can become suddenly timid, cautious, and deliberate when confronted with a press query. Imagination can inflate simple questions into wicked traps which can be avoided only through careful research and ponderous answers. All this adds up to missed opportunities and undeserved criticism. Many a negative story appearing in the media could have been ameliorated or avoided entirely if only the reporter's query had been answered prior to the arrival of his deadline. Once that original story appears, disclaimers or official explanations never quite catch up with it.

The following story, based on an actual occurrence, is offered by way of illustration. A reporter investigating environmental problems picked up a rumor that a local military installation had a large stockpile of poison gas secretly stored in old steel drums. Former base workers claimed they had seen the drums. The reporter queried the base information officer who, in turn, checked with the appropriate staff section. The principal staff officer concerned knew the answer was "no," but he also knew old records showed a shipment of mustard gas was indeed stored at the base for a two-month period during World War II. Obviously, caution was called for. The response was written and rewritten, staffed, forwarded for command approval, and revised. Days went by. Finally the answer was passed to the Information Office:

> *No poisonous gas or toxic material is stored on base at the present time, and no plans are in existence to store such material in the foreseeable future. Any material of this nature formerly located in this vicinity, if such material existed at all, has long since been removed, and no trace or residue of it remains.*

In the meantime the reporter's deadline had come and gone. The story appeared based on the rumored information under the headline "Poison Gas Allegedly Stored Carelessly At Local Military Installation." To fill out the story, the reporter had explained the various types of poison gas developed by the military over the years, to include the lethal nerve gases, and went on to describe the effects of biological warfare agents. The story included the fact that military authorities were asked to comment on the allegations but had not yet responded. The whole thing took up a major portion of page one.

When the editor finally received the military disclaimer, his inclination was to ignore it. After all, the story was now three days old, having long ago passed from the realm of news to the pages of history. Only as a

personal favor to the distraught information officer did the editor place on page 46 of the next issue a small item saying, "Local military officials claim no poison gas is stored on the base."

Among the local population, several individuals had had their darkest suspicions of the military confirmed, others began to revise their opinion of the military, and even the staunch supporters of national defense were hard pressed to explain the poison gas. Since almost none of these people normally reads page 46, the initial reaction became set opinion and passed into the future local lore as common knowledge.

And all of this would have been avoided if only the military authorities had abided by the simple rule: ANSWER PRESS QUERIES IMMEDIATELY.

At times, of course, complete answers cannot be immediately provided for press queries. They often occur during breaking news situations when facts are obscured by ongoing events. When this happens, the press should be provided with what you do know of the situation, along with an explanation of what is being done to alleviate it. Further information should then be relayed to the media as it becomes available. And note this: in times of crises, there are always certain individuals who rise to perform incredible feats. Their accomplishments should be brought promptly to the attention of the media, for the press loves heroes, and the accomplishments of a few dedicated individuals can turn an otherwise negative story into a positive one.

For all their perverse effects on officialdom, press deadlines can also work in your favor. For example, let us say an unfavorable news event takes place within your area of responsibility. If, rather than waiting for media representatives to discover it, you announce it yourself just prior to the arrival of local deadlines, only your version will be reported. There simply isn't time to seek other comments until after the story is aired, and by this time the event is no longer news.

Understandability. The threat of misunderstanding is an ever-present boogey man haunting the media and the newsmakers they cover. And those newsmakers can be every bit as guilty of causing misunderstanding on the part of readers as can the newsgatherers who disseminate their words. Military people and defense managers are a particular problem in this respect.

Like lawyers, doctors, and economists, military personnel tend to talk a language all their own. It is perfectly understandable to most of those with whom they communicate, since they are versed in the language, but to an outsider it often makes no sense at all. Unless he is an experienced military reporter with a degree in military jargon, the reporter interviewing a military official is often in for a nerve-wracking experience. He is expected to translate the military terminology into a form his readers can understand, and since he frequently does not understand it himself, he faces a real problem. What the reporter should do when he doesn't understand a term is to ask for an explanation. Many do. But some, particularly inexperienced reporters, are embarrassed to ask, so they guess. And when they guess some really bizarre narratives result, such as "APCs" (armored personnel carriers) becoming "army police cars."

You can easily avoid being misunderstood by merely giving a little thought to what you say when appearing on television or talking to a reporter. Use plain, everyday words and keep your sentences short. If you really must use a military word or phrase, explain it. And always watch the expression on the face of the reporter. If he suddenly looks confused or blank, stop and clarify what you are saying.

Finally, when talking to a reporter, get your main point up front. This is where the reporter puts it when he writes, and if he has to fish around in extraneous preliminary verbiage to find that point, there is a good chance he will miss it. If he does, you are as much at fault as he is. And while we are cutting back excess

verbiage, let us also discard those multi-word substitutes for single words which creep into our vocabulary. ("At this point in time"means "now.")

Credibility. Credibility is an asset we normally associate with a public official, and an important asset it is. But reporters also have credibility concerns. If what they report turns out to be false or inaccurate, they get chewed out. If it happens too often, they lose their jobs. If you happen to be the cause of their inaccuracy, it makes them very unhappy, indeed, and they will go to great lengths to get even.

In spite of his well-developed sense of skepticism, it is usually very easy to lie to a reporter. But there is a catch to it: you only get a chance to do it once—and to only one reporter. The truth will come out eventually, and when it does, that reporter will never again believe anything you have to say, whether it is true or not. And no other reporter will either, for the word gets around news circles very rapidly whenever an official lies to the press.

FROM A RELIABLE SOURCE . . .

A former editor of *Army Times* once told a class of war college students that when he was a young reporter, a three star general had led him down the primrose path during a personal interview in order to cover an ongoing operation. His story, completely erroneous, appeared on page one. Ultimately the truth came out and he was very nearly fired. He went on to say, "I spent the next two years making life miserable for that SOB. You know, he never made his fourth star, and I like to think I had a hand in denying it to him."

It is not hard to lie to the press, but it doesn't pay.

Newsworthiness. A frequently voiced criticism of the media is they never tell the good news—only the bad. All

too frequently we become miffed because they fail to accept our proffered "good news," and we sulk. We refuse to give them anything at all and, in so doing, pass up golden opportunities to air some really positive stories.

To avoid this, you must first accept the fact that media personnel are better judges of what constitutes news than you are. Actually the public is the ultimate judge, and the economics of competition rapidly carry the verdict to those who seek to make a living determining what is, and is not, news. Over time they get pretty good at it, or else they drop by the wayside.

Next, you must realize the number of news items available for selection varies from day to day. There are hot news days and some very cold ones too. Monday, for example, is usually a slow news day. Government offices and many business establishments are closed on the weekend, and not much mischief is carried out on Sunday. If you continually feed the media with non-time-sensitive items, there is a very good chance some of them will be run on slow news days. It is a question of relative availability. But leave the selection of news to the news selectors.

Competition. The business of disseminating news is a very competitive enterprise. Beating the competition can translate over time into a significant economic advantage, and winning margins are often measured in hours, or even minutes. Thus reporters are under intense pressure to beat out the competition or to discover something the competition has missed. Needless to say, intense pressure is generated when multiple news organs are attracted to the same story, and these pressures can lead reporters to act in bizarre ways. Doctor Jekylls can turn into Mr. Hydes. Reasonable, easygoing people can suddenly become pushy and obnoxious. And these antagonisms are heightened if it appears officialdom is dragging its feet, withholding information, or favoring a rival.

Realizing this, you should be prepared to accept it and not take it as a personal affront if a friendly reporter no longer appears friendly. You should also make sure that any official announcement or explanation is provided to all interested media representatives simultaneously.

Because of competitive pressures of the trade, the fraternity of reporters is not exactly a brotherhood of congeniality. In actual fact, rival reporters find it easy to build up an abiding dislike for one another, although they normally take great pains to hide their animosities from outsiders. But in spite of their differences, there is one time when all media representatives will lay their dislikes aside to join forces, place their wagons in a circle, and stand shoulder to shoulder fighting as one. That occasion is whenever they perceive a threat to the freedom of the press and their right to publish or broadcast whatever they choose.

In view of this, you should never challenge a reporter's right to report something unless you are ready to take on, not only him, but all his colleagues as well. You can, with impunity, question a correspondent's fairness, criticize his conduct, condemn him for breaking the rules. You can point out his errors and accuse him of being sloppy in checking his facts. But never, never, never say to him, "You can't write that!"

Techniques and Approaches

Techniques and approaches used by reporters in gathering news are numerous and varied. They vary according to the situation, presence of competition, availability of information, closeness of a deadline, and reporter experience. The attitude of the source of information influences the approach, as do such mundane things as weather, temperature, time of day, and whether or not the reporter has a headache. But regardless of circumstances, there is one technique all reporters use: THEY ALL LISTEN. They are listening as they walk down the corridors of the Pentagon, on the bus, in a bar, at a restaurant, at parties, during casual conversations. For some reason or other, government officials tend to overlook this technique, as illustrated by the heartbreaking epitaphs found on certain tombstones of careers:

"I didn't know he was a reporter."

"I wasn't talking to him at all."

"The interview was over. We were having a friendly drink at the bar."

"He didn't look like a reporter."

This does not mean reporters go out of their way to conceal their identity. If asked, they will identify themselves, but they feel no compulsion to volunteer the information. They take the position that if a loudmouthed public official is stupid enough to express a confidence where it can be overheard, then his thoughts should be shared with the public. And, of course, they have a point.

A good rule for public officials to follow is this: Unless you know who someone is, if he has ears, assume he is a reporter. Never assume a person just *can't* be a reporter because of gender, appearance, or conduct.

FROM A RELIABLE SOURCE . . .

Some years ago, a ruler of a small but significant Asian country survived an unsuccessful coup d'etat, and droves of reporters gathered to report the aftermath. The ruler refused all requests for interviews, but organized a large reception to reassure his followers, and all the reporters were invited. Among the American correspondents was a small, quiet female whom the other reporters largely ignored due to her size, demeanor, and sex. She refused to partake of the transportation arranged by the American Embassy for the reporters, but instead appeared at the palace gate on foot, where she was stopped by a guard a good half mile from the reception. Looking demure and vulnerable she asked the occupant of the next limousine to help her get to the reception. As it turned about, the occupant was the minister of defense, a charming man who was only too glad to help a damsel in distress. Pocketing her invitation, the enterprising young woman engaged the minister in a lively conversation and when they reached the palace, walked with him right into the reception. As it turned out, the vast majority of the guests, to include the press corps, were in a roped off area several yards away from the ruler. In his immediate presence were only his cabinet members, high-ranking members of the diplomatic community, and one small American woman reporter, who managed to expand a few words with the illusive leader into an impressive exclusive interview. Needless to say, the reporters standing behind the rope were not at all happy over the situation. And to rub salt into their wounds, when the ruler faced the roped off area to wave to his adoring subjects, she came up beside him and waved to her disgruntled colleagues. The incident did nothing to win her their hearts. But they no longer ignored her.

Never underestimate a reporter.

Reporter Codes

Contrary to popular opinion, reporters do have codes of conduct. They vary in scope from extensive to almost nothing at all, and they tend to be very personal things. Part of each code may be a formal set of "do's" and "don'ts" issued by the news organization for which the reporter works, but the rest has been developed by the reporter himself—a product of his training, experience, and individual character. These codes are never written down in their entirety. Indeed, few reporters will admit having any, since codes carry parameters of conduct, and parameters of conduct suggest "restraint," a dirty word in press circles.

Most reporter codes include, in one form or another, the following:

1. *Be fair.* Reporters try to be fair. This is not always evident, since reporters are human, and complete objectivity is a goal rather than a reality for any observer. Besides, one man's "lean" in one direction is another man's "bias" in the opposite one. Not infrequently letters to the editor include two different views citing the same story as proof of the publication's liberal bias and conservative bigotry.

2. *Protect the innocent.* For example, if a nine-year-old girl is raped, the local newspaper will run the story—after all, it is news and the community should be aware of it. But, the paper will not include the name of the little girl in the story. The same consideration will normally preclude a reporter from reporting the names of disaster victims until the next of kin have been notified, although this compassion does not apply when the casualty happens to be a public figure. In this case, the individual's misfortune, not the accident, becomes the story. Public officials are never considered "innocent"by the press.

3. *Protect sources of information.* A reporter will not reveal his source of information unless the source agrees to be identified. This makes sense. He simply does not want to kill the golden goose or to be identified, in the world of potential golden geese, as being the one who did so. This particular press policy often runs afoul of the American judicial system, and it is not uncommon to find a reporter sitting in jail for contempt of court. But before you shed a tear for this persecuted defender of press freedom, realize that he may welcome the opportunity of becoming a martyr for a principle in which he believes deeply. Also, he receives much attention and a lot of sympathy. And when at last he is released, he emerges a hero to his peers with perhaps a raise in pay to boot.

4. *Never let the subject of the story read the notes or the story itself until it is published.* This particular rule stems not so much from a reporter's love of secrecy as from the natural tendency of interviewees to think they can write better than the reporter. Like most rules, however, this one is sometimes broken. And if it is, if a reporter asks you to read a draft of his story, beware! He just may be offering you a last chance to retract a damaging statement.

5. *Abide by the rules.* The "rules" in this case refer to the rules governing the treatment of information, as agreed upon by reporter and the information source, PRIOR to the interview. Legitimate reporters take this rule very seriously. (See the discussion of what these rules mean under the heading,"Know the Rules," in Chapter II, p. 26.)

Use of Classified Information

Unfortunately, the protection of classified information does not loom large in press codes of conduct. In fact, it does not appear at all in most of them. Generally

speaking, however, it is safe to say a reporter will not use classified material in his story, PROVIDING: (1) He knows it to be classified, and (2) he judges it to be legitimately classified. This second proviso is the hooker, of course, for all reporters are skeptical about classified information and some see no reason to classify anything.

To the government official this cavalier attitude is horrifying, but media personnel rationalize their position as follows:

1. Inept public officials tend to hide their mistakes (or crookedness) by shrouding them with classifications designed to hoodwink the public. The media should be ever alert to detect public wrongdoing and make it known to the public, regardless of the classification involved.

2. If the press can learn a government secret, the chances are the enemy, or potential enemy, has already found it out.

3. If a classified item has found its way into one news organization, in all probability one or more rivals already have, or soon will have, the same information. The fear of being scooped by a rival exerts an overwhelming pressure on all newsreporters.

4. There is no law against the public media publishing classified information. Other countries have such laws. The United States does not (at least not in peacetime), and there is no inclination on the part of lawmakers to pass one.

Because of these considerations, even direct appeals to the editor and publisher by the highest ranking government officials are not always enough to deter a publication from exposing classified information. But there are times when reporters do hold back from using sensitive information, often in order to protect their

source. In this case, however, they often set about trying to get an official to reveal it, thereby opening the door for its publication without provoking pangs of press conscience. One method they use to accomplish this is to refer to the classified information in casual conversation with an official who is privy to it, hoping that the official will discuss the information, assuming (because the reporter already knows it) that it has been declassified. There is a lesson here: Just because a reporter appears to know what you believe to be classified, do not assume the classification has been downgraded.

Speculation as to how reporters manage to come up with government secrets can run to ridiculous extremes: they read upside down any papers which are lying on desks, go through drawers, plant listening devices, and steal documents. In reality they do none of these things. They don't have to. They get classified information because individuals who are authorized to handle classified information give it to them. And for the most part those who provide the information do so for what they consider the best of reasons—to include patriotism.

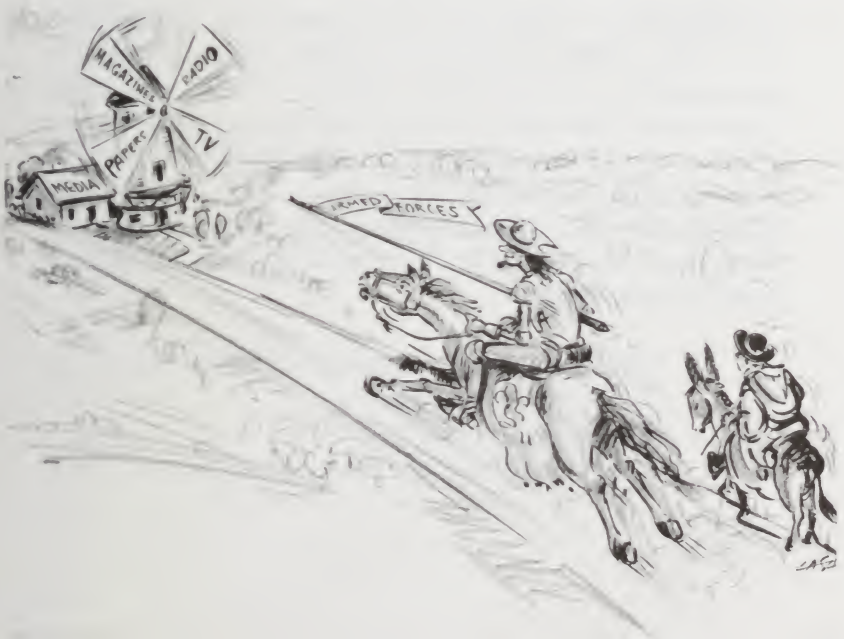
In some cases the leaking officials are high ranking members of the government pursuing national goals. Sometimes personal or political considerations are at the root of the leak. Budget infighting among the services tends to spawn leaks to the press, as do misclassification and overclassification.

All of this is scant consolation to the vast majority of government officials, particularly military officials, who are well aware of the damage in time, effort, and even lives that can result from publication of classified information. But before laying the blame exclusively on the back of the press, consider the justification once expressed by a national reporter when questioned by a class of war college students: "I have never used classified information," said he. "Of course, I have used information from a paper edged in red and marked Top Secret. But it could not have been classified. I am not

cleared to handle classified material, and the one who handed it to me knew this. Therefore, he must have declassified the information before he gave it to me. Right? After all, my brothers, I am not your keeper."

A Swarming of Reporters

The natural competitiveness of newsgathering and resulting reporter animosity are intensified in fast-breaking stories. Unfortunately, the circumstances which attract a swarm of reporters and set them on a frenzy of newsgathering are the very circumstances which require your attention more than servicing the appetites of news-hungry reporters. Reporters do not see it this way, however, and if they are not controlled, they can be unreasonably demanding, pushy, and downright obnoxious. Not only can they get in the way, they can become dangerous distractions. Thus, in case of accidents or disasters, reporters MUST be controlled. But at the same time, they must have access to information.



Reporters seeking to cover a breaking news situation must be treated firmly, fairly, and equally. Information concerning what is occurring (to include what you are doing to rectify the situation) must be fed to them continually; and as soon as the situation allows it, they should be taken to see what is going on. But above all, they must be kept under control. This task properly belongs to the information officer; but remember, he cannot work in a vacuum. He simply does not have the resources to do this all by himself. He requires military police support, supplemental transportation, communication facilities, and (above all) an open channel of communications to the command center. None of these things are forthcoming unless they have been planned well in advance. Nothing can sour press relations faster than a failure to anticipate the presence of reporters when disaster strikes, and nothing can foul up a counter disaster effort more thoroughly than the presence of a pack of uncontrolled reporters ricocheting around the site.

During the period of breaking news, particularly if it is unfavorable—as breaking news usually is—it is normally wise to leave your communication with reporters in the hands of the information officer. You, the commander or responsible official, should stay away from them at this time, and you have a very good reason to do so, since the situation will undoubtedly have placed more pressing demands upon your time. Then, too, reporters are not usually in their most congenial moods when there are several of them present. Indeed, there is merit in the old saw:

> When newsmen number more than one,
> Let your IO have the fun.
> See reporters only when,
> There ain't no more than one of them.

Unfortunately, this is not always possible. For one reason or another, it may come about that you are forced to face a mob of angry reporters. If so, be sure you first review the section in Chapter II entitled "Facing a Swarm of Killer Reporters," p. 41.

Chapter II
Some Guides, Rules, and Warnings

The Rules

We come now to five rules, or guidelines, which should always govern your conduct in dealing with the public media. The first one pertains to sticking out the neck.

1. Stay within your own area of knowledge and responsibility.

Ego and insecurity combine to tempt officials to guess when they are not quite sure of the answer, but it doesn't pay when dealing with reporters. If you don't know, say so. Do not apologize or make excuses, just get the answer as soon as you can. A good technique to use when meeting the press is to bring along some subordinates to handle the technical questions. A strong, confident leader is never afraid to share the spotlight with subordinates, and reporters know this.

The error of extending your opinion beyond your scope of authority can be serious. It normally takes one of two forms. The first occurs when you have left an assignment and are tempted to talk about it as though you were still there. Do not do it. It can lead to the dissemination of misinformation, and it will undoubtedly upset your successor. The other situation comes about when you feel called upon to comment about a decision taken by someone further up the chain of command which adversely affects your project or command. For example, let us say you are a project officer of a

successful weapons system which has been cut back for budgetary reasons. The press seeks your comments. You can safely talk about the weapons system, enumerate its successes, and express your disappointment. But as soon as you point out the stupidity of that budget cut, you have stepped out of your area of responsibility and might just as well announce to the press your impending retirement. It will save having to call the reporters back again to announce it.

Now there may come a time when your disagreement with higher headquarters becomes so deep that you decide to pack it in. This perfectly honorable move, often called "falling on your sword," is normally carried out quietly, with perhaps a letter of protest against the offending policy or decision accompanying your resignation. But if you want your departure to grab attention, this is a very shortsighted way to go about it. If you are going to fall on your sword, you want to bleed conspicuously, and the public media are always ready to dramatize a public bleeding. So let them help. But remember, in order for this to work, you must have sufficient rank to attract press attention, and the issue must be sufficiently newsworthy to merit coverage.

2. Know the rules.

Our second guideline requires that you understand the rules governing treatment of information which has been provided under restrictive conditions. For example, "background only," "nonattributable," and "off the record" are some of the terms used. There are others. Together they form a vast field of pitfalls waiting to engulf the unwary official. The problem stems from the fact that there are no commonly accepted definitions for any of these terms, and the official who uses one without defining it each time he uses it is asking for a lot of unnecessary pain. And he must submit his definition BEFORE he provides the information, for the restrictions are valid only if the reporter agrees to take

the information under the terms offered. Thus, the definition of the term is up to the source, but the decision to accept or reject it is the prerogative of each individual reporter. If one refuses to accept the information under the terms offered, he must have the opportunity to leave before it is given to those who have agreed to the terms. Thus the comment, "What I just said is off the record," is superfluous, ridiculous, and futile. Unless the reporters are given the opportunity to decline acceptance, what is said is ON the record and all your tears will not wash out one word of it.

Then there are other problems. Even when all the procedures have been carried out correctly, if just one reporter breaks his bond and uses the information without restriction—it seldom happens, but it does happen—then all the other reporters are automatically released from their bonds. Also, if one of the reporters bound by the restrictions finds the same information elsewhere, he is free to use it. And once reporters know forbidden information exists, they will look elsewhere to find it.

We can see from the foregoing that the cards are generally stacked against the public official when it comes to playing the game of restricted usage with the public media. And the question arises, "Why play the game at all?" It is a good question, and the answer is: "Don't." When you have become a top-ranking official or a multi-starred flag officer, you will probably have become experienced enough with the media to venture into the murky realm of restricted information. But until then, stay on the record. Reporters prefer it that way, and when you come right down to it, if the information you have requires special handling, you probably should not be talking to the press about it anyway.

3. Do a good job first. Then (and only then) tell about it.

Never reveal what you plan to accomplish when talking to the press. You may not accomplish all of it, and the story will not be about what you did accomplish but rather about your shortfall. So do the job FIRST, then tell the media about it. And be sure to tell them. After all, the public has the right to know when you do a great job as well as when you foul up. And remember, it is not only the public who reads newspapers and watches television. Your subordinates do too, and hearing good things about themselves builds confidence and helps morale. Seniors in your chain of command also pay attention to the media, and they too react to it. For some strange reason, even though he is fully aware of what is going on in his organization, reading a story about a subordinate's achievements appreciably boosts the image of that subordinate in the eyes of the boss. This is particularly so if the subordinate was smart enough to give the boss credit in the interview.

4. Never brag.

No one likes a braggart. Any public official enumerating his achievements to the media has to be

careful he doesn't appear to be an egoist, and the easiest way to avoid this is not to use the word "I." Always use the plural "we" when describing accomplishments. It is particularly important to do this when appearing on radio or television, but it also holds true for the print media. Not only does the word "we" show modesty on the part of the speaker, it also extends credit to the subordinate members of the team, which in turn enhances morale and builds loyalty. Take a page from the book of the lovable quarterback being interviewed following a big gridiron victory:

"Joe, you did a superb job," gushes the reporter. "You ran for 292 yards and 6 touchdowns, passed for 8 more, completed 63 out of 67 passes, and kicked 9 field goals. What an afternoon!"

Joe agrees with him, of course, but he is smart enough not to say so. Instead he smiles modestly and says, "I couldn't have done a thing without that offensive line. Those guys are great—Pete, Tom, Al, and all the rest. And how about those receivers? How could I miss completing a pass with guys like Mike and Marty out there to snag it? And don't forget that defensive unit. Those guys stubbornly held our formidable opponents scoreless. Of course the whole thing was made possible by Coach Pesonagas. He mapped it out. We just executed it."

Everyone is happy. The public is not only impressed with Joe's achievements, it is delighted over his modesty. How can you keep from loving a guy like that? Needless to say, Coach Pesonagas loves that guy too, to say nothing of the high esteem in which he is held by Pete, Tom, Al, Mike, Marty, and the rest of the team.

You must not discard the word "I" completely, however. It must be available when things turn sour. Never blame others when talking to the media, even though they are the cause of the problem. Take the blame. "I am responsible. I offer no excuse." This is the response people expect from a real leader. Do not disappoint them. And, after all, if you are the commanding

officer, you ARE responsible. That's what command is all about.

5. Understand and use your public affairs resources.

All government agencies have public affairs resources. Some are extensive, others minimal, and they vary widely in scope and organization. But they are always available in one form or another to provide the public official valuable assistance in dealing with the public media, and the wise official is well versed in their function and how he can use them. And if he is really wise, he seeks this information BEFORE, not after, he becomes ensnarled with the press.

Each of these public affairs organizations is headed by a key individual. He is known by various names: public affairs officer, press secretary, executive assistant, press spokesman, information officer, press officer . . . and various others. Whatever the name, he is the one who advises you on press matters, acts as your spokesman to the media, and accompanies you when you meet reporters. Here we call him the information officer—for no particular reason—and we devote the next section to him: to what he should do for you and what you should do to maximize his effectiveness.

The Information Officer

There was a time, in the military departments at least, when the position of information officer (or public affairs officer as he is currently called) was all too often considered a catch-all position to be filled by individuals who didn't seem to fit anywhere else. Thus hidden, the misfits could be safely ignored, since, unlike most staff officers, their input appeared to have no bearing on the day-to-day operation of the organization. Their only task was to keep the media off the backs of their commanders.

Everything worked fine so long as there was

nothing within the organization to catch media interest, but as military demands on the nation's manpower and money increased, so too did press scrutiny of the military. It was not unusual for a hapless commander to suddenly discover that dealing with the media was no longer a matter of choice, at least not his choice. As he felt his future crumbling about his ears he searched in vain for assistance, realizing too late that officers who do not seem to fit anywhere else, do not fit well as information officers either.

Fortunately this situation has mostly been rectified. By and large, good people now fill the information officer positions and the old "press-be-damned" commander is a rarity. Today most senior military commanders and government officials realize that dealing with the media is part of their job, that a good information officer is a valuable asset, and that there are certain things the boss has to do to assure this asset functions properly. Chief among these things are:

1. *Recruit a good information officer.* Bad information officers can get you into all kinds of trouble with the press since reporters tend to judge you by the skill of your aides. You must have confidence in the information officer if he is to properly carry out his duties.

2. *Make sure your information officer is loyal to you and the organization.* Loyalty is perhaps his single most important attribute. An information officer who thinks badly of his commander cannot help but telegraph that information to reporters, whether he specifically voices his opinions or not. Divided loyalties can also be a problem. There is a tendency among government agencies to appoint former reporters as press agents, the rationale being that their backgrounds will better enable them to relate to the media representatives with whom they will be dealing. But now there arises, potentially at least, the specter of double loyalty. That press officer will someday return to the ranks of those who are now in the other

camp, and regardless of the individual's true loyalty, the situation spawns the nagging question: is he attempting to influence the press on behalf of the agency, or is he serving the press at the expense of the agency? Within the military at least, the pitfall is avoided by assuring that information personnel are career individuals with a personal stake in the organization.

3. *Always be available to the information officer.* Time sensitivity of breaking news and the competitive intensity of news gathering make it imperative that official reaction be rapid, accurate, and command-directed. The key to the situation is the commander/information officer team, and if there is a delay in getting this team into action, you can find yourself playing catch-up ball in a no-win game.

But being available to the information officer is more easily said than done. The problem lies beyond the organization chart (which gives him direct access to you) and perhaps even beyond your personal desires. First of all, the information officer must feel secure in interrupting you when the situation requires, and second, your doorkeeper (chief of staff, executive officer, deputy, or whoever) must be attuned to the situation. The gatekeeper (we will call him your chief of staff), in order to do his job properly, must know who you see and what you say to them. He is not at all sympathetic to the idea of anyone going directly to you, no matter what the organization chart says. Furthermore, he realizes your time is valuable, and he does not take kindly to lower-ranking officers bothering you. All this can easily lead to a clogged communication channel, since the chief of staff is not only a most determined individual, but he is also significantly senior in rank to the information officer.

A proven method of solving, or at least alleviating, this problem is for the commander to call together his chief of staff and the information officer and speak

along the following lines. "If there is a time-sensitive news event occurring within this command, I must know about it immediately, and I expect my information officer to so inform me no matter what I am doing. If I am in my office, I expect my chief of staff to be present when I am briefed so that he may carry out my directions."

This serves multiple purposes. It makes it clear to both the chief of staff and the information officer that, if the situation demands it, you must be notified, even if it means breaking into something else you are doing. By placing the responsibility of determining what is important on the information officer (who, after all, is best suited to make that determination) you simplify the doorkeeper's weighing of priorities when it comes to media matters. Finally you preserve the chief of staff's right to know what is going on (and to have an input to the decision process) by assuring his presence when the information officer briefs you. Now the information officer must understand that this open door stands ajar only for media matters of pressing concern which must be dealt with immediately. For routine communications he goes through the chief of staff, just like any other staff officer. Indeed, if you are fortunate, the need for him to reach you directly and rapidly may never arise; but for the information officer to properly do his job, he must always have access to you, day and night.

4. *Always show confidence in the information officer, both in the presence of reporters and at staff meetings.* This is accomplished at staff meetings by treating him with the same respect, and affording him the same attention you extend to your principal staff officers. In the presence of reporters, you should treat him as a trusted aide. This effort on your part not only makes his job easier, it also saves you a lot of time. The vast majority of queries coming to the information officer are of a routine nature, their answers readily available through other staff members; but if those staff members do not

perceive that you have confidence in him, they will withhold information he seeks until you authorize its release. By the same token, a reporter who does not feel you trust your information officer will refuse to recognize him as your spokesman. Again you will be called upon to become involved in matters which should be handled at a lower level.

5. *Make sure the information officer is able to keep himself informed.* Remember, he represents not just you, but your entire command as well; and in order to do this, he has to know what is going on. And this knowledge should extend to classified activities. A once fashionable train of thought held that if the information officer was kept ignorant of classified information, nothing classified would find its way to the press. It was much like denying matches to firefighters as a way to prevent fires. And it worked out just about as well. In reality, the information officer is the least likely of anyone in your command to drop classified items where they can be scooped up by the media. Not only is he well aware of the scooping techniques, he knows full well the headaches he is destined to suffer whenever something classified makes its appearance in the press. If, on the other hand, the information officer is privy to sensitive information, he is in a better position to protect it and head off any rumors containing bits and pieces of it.

6. *If, within your area of responsibility, a news event is significant enough to attract an influx of national news correspondents, get help.* Your information resources simply are not sufficient to adequately handle a large number of high-powered reporters representing national news organizations. But your service or department does have these resources and will make them available if needed. If and when such an occasion arises, the information personnel assigned to help will be representing the head of your service or agency and will have his backing on matters pertaining to the media. Thus, it is a

good idea to accept their advice and also to realize that, while they are there to help you, their first loyalty is to your service.

Press Errors and What to Do About Them

When the press makes an error in reporting your activities, as it is quite likely to do at one time or another, it is only natural for you to resent it. And your first inclination is to seize the sword of righteousness and sweep down the list of available retributions:

Kill the reporter!
Sue!
Chew out the editor!
Write a nasty letter!
Reject all further contacts with the public media!

Before you actually do any of these things, pause to consider the ramifications, first spending a moment to reflect on how press errors occur.

When we are the victims of a press error, our first inclination is to blame the reporter. Often he is to blame, but not always. And even in those cases where he has made an error, it is frequently an error of misunderstanding rather than carelessness, and we must share the blame when it comes to misunderstanding.

FROM A RELIABLE SOURCE . . .

At a party in Washington, a well known presidential aide reportedly poured a drink down the front of a woman's dress. The report was carried as a small item deep in the local Sunday paper. Few read it, and those that did tended to place it in the gossip category. However, the following day, the President's press secretary called a press conference to deny the report on behalf of the aide. The attending journalists represented papers from all over the world and every section of the country. Few, if any of them, had seen the report, so the press secretary had to repeat the damaging accusation before he could deny it. Thus, the report, which was on the verge of dying that Monday morning, was brought back to life and sent speeding to the four winds, along with the denial, which really wasn't necessary at all.

It is sometimes best to ignore press errors. The cure can be worse than the malady.

Or it could be the fault of a rewrite person who left something out in order to get the story length to fit available space. Or if an important segment of the story is missing, it could be a case of editor cutback. Most news stories are written in inverted pyramid style in which the lead paragraph tells all who, what, where, when, and sometimes how and why. Succeeding paragraphs add additional information, in order of importance, until all available material is exhausted and bystanders are called upon for rehash and reaction. This

style of writing has its origins back in the days when the telegraph and high-speed press first made their appearances. The reliability of telegraph lines was not all that great, and the wired story working its way up to the climax was frequently curtailed before it got to the point. As time went on, things got worse rather than better, because with the coming of the Civil War there appeared determined bands of cavalrymen helping those telegraph lines to break. Reporters were taught to get the crux of the story right up front. If only the lead paragraph got through, the editor had a story, and no matter where the break came in the transmission, the surviving linage provided a coherent report.

Technical advances (and perhaps the disappearance of cavalrymen) have negated the original purpose of this style of writing; yet the practice remains even in the age of microwave communication. It does so because editors find it easy to work with. In the makeup of newspapers, space limitations can be a real headache. Column inches translate into words, and long stories can be made to fit only by taking out some of the words. Now if the story is properly written in inverted pyramid style, this is easily accomplished by simply cutting from the bottom until the optimum length remains. The practice saves time, avoids the pitfalls of rewrite, and makes it possible to leave out great gobs of information which the subject of the story views as absolutely critical. The electronic media is subject to the same pressures for compression—even more so.

Another grievance directed at the press concerns headlines. A story can be very positive, yet carry a misleading, negative headline. We tend to blame the reporter, but in this case he is completely innocent. He doesn't write the headlines. Headlines are written by headline writers. Indeed, the reporter himself may be surprised by the headline. Allocated a set amount of space, constrained by the number of letters which will fit therein, headline writers (often working under severe time constraints) must come up with a series of words

which make sense, grab the reader's attention, accurately reflect the story which follows, and make the reader want to read it. It is not an easy task. Headlines are supposed to reflect the essence of the story, and they are normally taken from the lead paragraph. However, headline writers have been known to search further down the narrative for a peg upon which to hang a flight of fancy or satisfy a personal bias. This practice often makes for snappier attention getters, but it can also make for angry public officials justifiably crying foul. And their protests are normally heeded, for editors know better than to condone the practice.

Still another source of press error is the transcriber mistake. Except for newspapers on the leading edge of technology, the finished stories have to be transcribed to another medium before they are printed, and those doing the transcribing are only human. They make mistakes. Normally these mistakes take the form of typographical errors—striking the wrong key—but not always. Overzealous or misguided transcribers like to assist editors by correcting overlooked misspellings and

dropping extraneous words. For example, in a story announcing the visit of Lieutenant General Albert Smith to the 98th Infantry Division, a keen-eyed transcriber may spot two different ranks and lop one off to have the story read "Lieutenant Albert Smith. . . ." Three-star General Smith may have a sense of humor and laugh it off, but you can bet there will be people in the division who do not find it all that funny.

What To Do. What should you do about press errors? Since you now understand reporters are not the source of all press errors, in all fairness you should probably not threaten the reporter with death. Besides, threatening reporters can be counterproductive. In fact, the only public official to successfully do so was General William T. Sherman, well over a century ago. Stating his opinion that newspaper reporters were nothing more than spies, Sherman threatened to hang the next one he found in his camp. Needless to say, the Northern press joined the citizens of Georgia in wishing Sherman a speedy trip to hell, but his Army remained free of reporters.

For a public official to sue a newspaper for libel carries but a fraction more chance of success than a scheme for doing away with reporters. The futility of such action stems from a 1953 landmark decision by the Supreme Court. Among other things, the Court held that the public media's vigorous pursuit of public wrongdoing was essential to the well-being of a democratic society and that this pursuit must not be weakened by threat of court action over honest mistakes. Thus, a public official, in order to obtain redress in court over false accusations by the press, must not only show the accusations to be false, he must also show that they were made with malice. In other words, he must prove the offending news organization knew the accusations were false when it printed them.

Needless to say, malice on the part of a newspaper is a very difficult thing to prove in court, as legions of irate public officials have found over the years. The

Supreme Court decision also covers the electronic media, as well as the print media, as demonstrated by General William Westmoreland when he locked horns with CBS and lost. Because of all this, and because the government refuses to pay court costs for its officials, it is a good idea to think twice before you sue a news organization, UNLESS you have a lot of money, a lot of patience, and not much sense.

Chewing out the editor is never a good idea. No editor worth his salt is going to take a chewing out from a public official lying down, no matter what the circumstances. There is an adage which warns: Never get into an argument with anyone who buys ink by the barrel. It is sage advice.

Closely allied with the "chewing out" course of action is the "write a nasty letter" option. Writing a nasty letter can be very therapeutic. And it does no harm providing you never mail the letter. Once such a letter is mailed, the best you can hope for is that it will be ignored. If it is published, it is likely to be very embarrassing since angry letters never look as good in print as they do when they are written. And remember, your clever expression of righteous indignation may well be viewed as the ravings of a crybaby by the readers.

This is not to suggest that letters to the editor should not be written. Such letters are beneficial, providing they are reasonable and factual and seek to correct and explain rather than condemn. So simmer down, count to ten, wait at least twenty-four hours, and then write the letter. Whether it is published or not, it will be heeded and will make everyone concerned more careful in the future. Better still, let your information officer write the letter. It is usually more effective if someone else pleads your case if you have been wronged.

Finally, before you do anything at all, stop and consider if it would not be best to do nothing. Was the error really serious enough to merit action? Does it really matter to the public? Does the average reader really give a damn whether that pictured airplane is an

F92B or an F91C? And if a negative story is partially inaccurate, is it worth seeing the whole thing brought up again to correct the part that is wrong? There is a lot to be said in favor of the old saw: The best way to get rid of obnoxious guests, pesky kids, and unfavorable news items is to ignore them.

Facing a Swarm of Killer Reporters

If not properly handled, a group of reporters attempting to handle a breaking news situation can turn into a howling, angry mob. The condition under which this occurs is brought about by various combinations of the following ingredients: Breaking news coupled with impatient editors, reporters denied access to the news event, a lack of information as to what is happening, intense pressure of competition, and the perception that officials are trying to cover up information. Physical discomforts such as cold, hunger, rain, and fatigue can be contributing factors. Rumors fly, anger builds, and frustrations feed upon one another until they finally boil over into a seething, surly swarm of correspondents who appear more intent upon insulting their detractors than gathering news.

This type of press reaction can usually be prevented through proper planning and correct execution of the plan, but even the best of efforts can be confounded by unforeseen circumstances, or just plain bad luck. When and if it occurs, the best thing to do is to leave press communications up to the information specialists. They are not impervious to press stings and media insults, but these unpleasantries go along with the job, and they are generally in a better position to handle them than you are. But there is almost always an exception to any rule, and so it is with this one. If the information officer has lost credibility (as often happens when angry reporters swarm) and it becomes necessary to correct an erroneous impression or wrong information, then you

may have to face the throng all by yourself. Fortunately, there are techniques to ease your ordeal.

First of all, stand on an elevated platform to speak—the bed of a truck, a loading platform, a box. This places you in a position to control the gathering, keeps reporters from pushing close enough to jostle you, and provides you an important psychological edge.

Begin by making a prepared statement. Don't read it. Don't necessarily write it down. But prepare it in advance. It should contain only the essentials you want to get across, briefly, simply, and to the point. For example: "The fire is out. The situation is under control. There is no danger to the surrounding communities." A long diatribe, no matter how well crafted, will be interrupted or ignored.

Take one question at a time. Look directly at the questioner as he asks the question and maintain eye contact with him as you answer. This discourages interruption, since the one who breaks in is interrupting a colleague as well as you. If you are interrupted, stop talking but maintain eye contact with the one you were answering. When the interruption is over, continue talking where you left off. NEVER raise your voice to drown out a detractor. He will simply raise his voice an octave, and you will be on your way to a shouting match. Rather, keep your voice low and your pace of delivery deliberate, concentrating on one question at a time.

NEVER show anger or impatience. This is often difficult to do under the circumstances, since you are likely to be the recipient of slurs, taunts, and downright insults. But it is important for you to remain cool and polite, because an angry response on your part only provides your antagonists a resistance upon which to build their rage. It is difficult to maintain a verbal nastiness, unless your opponent responds in kind. You may take comfort in the fact that reporters do not usually mean anything personal when they badger a public official in such a situation. They are merely venting their frustration—and perhaps showing off a bit to their peers.

Usually embedded in a swirl of aggressive reporters are some television cameras. Yet you will seldom see on your television screen the rough and tumble pushing, shoving, and screaming that characterize a swarming of killer reporters. The reason for this is that no television station or network wants to show the media abusing anyone, because the viewing audience tends to side with the underdog. So, it is edited out. Besides, the cameras are pointed at you, not the reporters, which brings us to an interesting point: Any anger or loss of control by you is automatically reported out of context, since the cause of your reaction is not fully reported.

The Press Ambush

A distasteful second cousin to the swarm of angry reporters is the press ambush. It occurs when you are at the center of a hot news item—usually running distinctly against you, and you do not want to talk to reporters. But reporters want to talk to you, so they lie in wait at some location where you must pass. The entrance to a courthouse is a favorite place. The idea is to block your path and induce you to answer questions, or perhaps to hurl an angry retort as the television cameras grind away.

The best antidote for the press ambush is early detection and avoidance. It is usually easy to detect, since a gaggle of reporters is a very difficult thing to conceal, but avoidance can be tricky. Alternate routes can be limited or covered by other reporters, and in such cases a running of the gauntlet is unavoidable.

If you must pass through a press ambush, arrange to have a team of allies to surround you and clear the way through the road block. It helps if the allies are large and threatening in appearance. If they are clad in police uniforms, so much the better. As you pass through the reporters, walk with dignity and at a normal pace. Hold your head up and do not frown. Completely ignore all questions and comments. If the mood of the

gathering is benign rather than hostile (a gathering of supporters rather than detractors), you may want to smile and wave or perhaps stop and favor your fans with a brief statement.

If you elect, for any reason, to speak to the ambushers, then prepare what you are going to say before you enter the swirl. Keep it brief. Then as you pass through the throng, stop, hold up your hand, speak directly to one of the reporters (preferably one holding a television microphone), then continue your passage. If you decide to say more than a few words or to respond to questions, the event is no longer an ambush, but a press conference. (See "Press Conference" in Chapter IV.)

And a Few More Points to Remember

1. Should reporters be invited to official functions such as receptions and parties? Yes, there is nothing wrong with this, PROVIDING they are invited and treated like all the other guests. To expect them to cover a banquet and be fed a sandwich out in the kitchen (it has been done) is not only rude, it is distinctly counterproductive. Whenever media personnel are included on a guest list, it is important that all the other guests be made aware of their identity—remember, reporters are great listeners. You should exercise common sense in determining what type of party reporters should be invited to. Any gathering which could become boisterous, rowdy, or paint an unworthy picture of the organization should not include the press. Reporters tend to be great party people; but they have long memories.

2. Assume all microphones are "live," and stay away from them unless you are speaking for the record. Many a promising career has been ruined by an apparently disconnected microphone. And treat cameras with the same leery respect.

3. In foreign countries the controlling office for official news releases is the American Embassy, and any military officer or public official who talks to the press in foreign lands without checking first with the embassy is asking for trouble. Normally the ambassador's press officer or United States Information Service official will be available to help, and he should be present at any interview you have. He is familiar with local customs and concerns, he knows US policy and the American position on items of local interest, he knows the local reporters, and he is trained to keep you out of trouble if you will but listen to him. So listen, and realize you are speaking for the President of the United States so far as the local public is concerned. Also note that foreign reporters operate under different rules, and even American reporters gathering news in foreign countries can operate differently.

4. Photographs offer excellent opportunities for the enterprising information officer, and he should be encouraged in efforts to get them placed with the press. But for the photographs to be used, they must meet the criteria set by editors both in quality and content. Handshaking, medal-pinning, award-presenting pictures have a tough time making the newspaper; but an Armed Forces Day photo of a large-eyed little boy wearing an oversized helmet as he sits at the controls of a tank or airplane is likely to be on the front page. You are interested in showing that fine-looking soldier, sailor, or airman assisting the little boy, while the editor focuses on the child; but the two are packaged together, thereby serving mutual interests. The public official can also profitably borrow a page from the politician's book of tricks when it comes to photographers. That candidate chucking the baby under the chin is not just trying to get the parents to vote for him; he is also hoping a news photographer will find the kid appealing enough to take a picture.

5. Never invite media representatives to call you directly. They will do so. Any reporter worth his salt would rather talk to the head person directly than the information officer. Eventually you will be doing the information officer's job, and this can be quite time consuming. Allowing reporters to call you directly can also be embarrassing. All executives are supposed to know what is going on in their organizations at all times. They don't of course, but it is a myth all public officials seek to preserve. That myth is easily shattered by a midnight call from the press.

6. Hold off on the identification of casualties to the media following an accident or catastrophe until next of kin have been notified; but once that notification has taken place, it is important to get the names out to the public as soon as possible. The reason for this is not to satisfy morbid curiosities, but rather to allay fears. Anyone who has a relative or loved one who could possibly have been involved worries until the names of the dead and injured have been published. All government agencies have policies and procedures dealing with the notification of next of kin, and these should be followed carefully, for deviation can lead to anguish, anger, and heartache.

Media representatives are normally quite understanding about this. As a rule, they can be expected to cooperate, even though they know the names, providing the situation is explained to them. But remember, you must ask, not threaten. And there is one important exception to the rule. If the casualty is a public figure, his death or injury, rather than the accident, becomes central to the story, and he will be identified.

Although news gatherers are sensitive to next of kin notification, they can be downright insensitive when it comes to respecting the privacy of grieving relatives. If the victim's family is residing on a military reservation, military police can (and should) be posted to keep reporters away. But for families residing in the public

domain, no such protection can be provided. In this case, however, someone can (and should) be offered to assist the family by answering the door and politely, but firmly, turning away the press.

Having gained an appreciation of the reporter's role and some general guidelines, let us now turn to a critical type of press encounter: the interview.

Chapter III
The Press Interview

Being the subject of a press interview can be a traumatic experience. But it need not be. It can be a rich and rewarding experience, provided you have prepared for it. It is all a question of knowledge and confidence—knowledge of the press and confidence in yourself. The former can be gained from reading this book; the latter from being prepared.

Preparing for the Interview

The actual interview preparation is modified according to the situation. Obviously, you will do different things to ready yourself for seeing a reporter you have met before, as opposed to meeting a total stranger; and the publication for whom the reporter is writing will also influence the preparation. These particular steps are based upon the following assumptions: You are the commanding officer or senior official of the installation and have an information officer on your staff. The reporter represents a local publication, is a few years younger than you, is a male, and does not specialize in military reporting. It is further assumed this is your first meeting with him. In this particular case the reporter represents a print medium, but most of the preparation outlined equally applies when you are preparing for a television interview. Additional things to consider when going before a television camera are outlined under the "Television" section of Chapter IV.

Well before the interview is requested, you should have laid the foundation by letting your information officer know you welcome interviews by legitimate

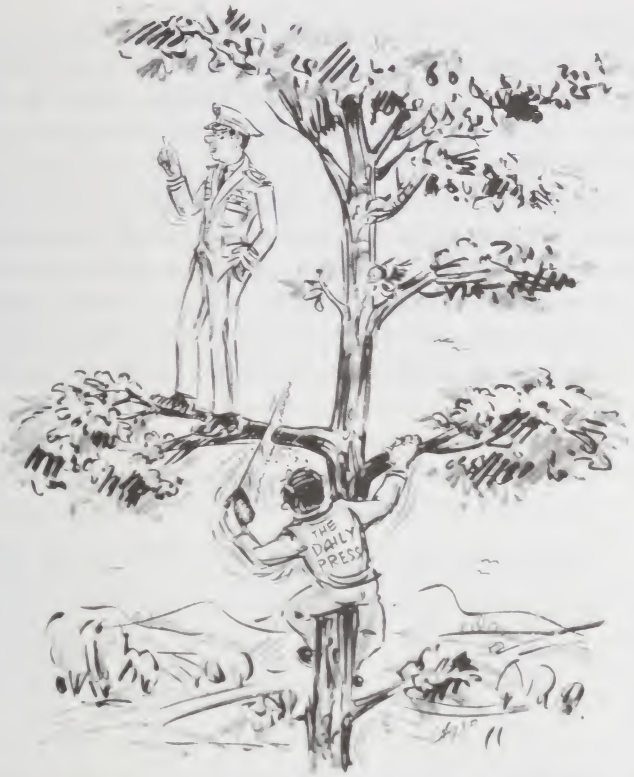
reporters. This allows him to agree to arrange an interview when one is requested without saying he has to check first to see if you will grant it. It is a minor point but a significant one. He then explains that you are very busy and he will have to arrange to work the interview into your schedule. He asks if there is any particular area of interest the reporter wishes to pursue—if there is, it will assist your preparation, but don't assume reporter questions will be limited to this one area. He also comes to terms with the reporter on the length of the interview. A half-hour is typical, although it could be longer.

Set the interview date two or three days hence to provide yourself adequate time for preparation and clear your schedule for an additional half-hour on the far side of the interview. The information officer then informs the reporter of the time and place of the interview, and that "place" is always in your office. For technical reasons a television interview may be held at the station, but print reporters should always be invited to your office. It is a question of turf. There is an advantage to operating on one's home turf.

Now for the preparation. First, learn all you can about the reporter. Read some articles he has written or, in the case of television, watch some of his programs. The information officer should be able to provide this material, and he should also provide detailed information about the reporter's background: his hobbies, interests, schooling, family, etc. Clear a file cabinet in your brain and lock all this information away in one of the drawers.

Next, decide on two or three (not too many) things you want to get across in the interview. Say them out loud and keep them clear and brief, not more than seven or eight sentences at the most. Give some thought to how you are going to work them into the interview and file them away. Now comes the hard part.

Think of all the possible questions the reporter might ask you, form your answers, and place them in that file cabinet. Be sure you don't neglect the really hard



question which might be embarrassing. If you beat your spouse, be prepared to answer why. The chances are pretty slim that a reporter would ever ask such a question, but if you happen to be a spouse beater, having an answer ready will greatly ease your apprehension when talking to the press. The answers to the hard questions should be truthful and brief, and they should include a transitional segment which leads the conversation into a more comfortable area. For example: "Yes, it is true our initial failure rate was much too high, and it caused us to burn a lot of midnight oil. But it led to the development of a whole new set of innovative approaches. For example, it paved the way for our new retrieval system. Let me tell you about it. . . . "

The process of anticipating questions and preparing answers is best accomplished with someone's

help. We all have blind spots when attempting to identify our vulnerabilities. The information officer is particularly suited for this, since with experience he has become adept at anticipating press questions. But remember, whoever it is who helps you must not be a "yes-man," because some of the potential questions can be embarrassing, and an intimidated subordinate can hardly be expected to suggest them. In this case a husband or wife can be a valuable advisor. Spouses are seldom intimidated, and they are also good at weeding out the bureaucratic jargon which tends to creep into our answers.

The Interview

Finally the day and hour of the interview arrive, and the information officer escorts the reporter to your office. They find you busy at work at your desk. The reporter, depending on his experience and background, may well feel a sense of awe as he arrives. There are plaques on the wall, models of tanks or ships or airplanes standing on the shelves, flags on display behind your chair. To a young reporter it can be intimidating, but you immediately put him at ease by getting up from behind your desk and greeting him warmly. Shake his hand, smile, seat him at a coffee table, seat yourself beside him, and start the interview. Yes, you start the interview by asking him something personal: "I understand your son, Tim, is the star quarterback for the Little League Lancers. When is his next game?" The chances are the reporter will find this most impressive. Here is an obviously important person who is warm and friendly and who has taken the trouble to find out about Tim.

Needless to say, you have to adapt the welcome to the reporter and the situation, but whatever approach you take, the greeting should be warm and the initiative should be yours. The purpose is to establish at the onset

a parent-child (or older sibling-younger sibling) relationship with you holding the senior position. Once established, the relationship is fairly easy to maintain and, in fact, easy to reaffirm at subsequent meetings.

Now the question arises, what happens to the information officer? Once he has introduced the reporter, does he leave the room or stay? And if he stays, where does he sit and what does he do? There are opposing opinions in regard to these questions. As a rule, reporters do not like to have information personnel present at interviews. They feel their presence is inhibiting at best and downright insulting at worst.

There is nothing wrong with seeing a reporter without anyone else present, providing you are dealing with an experienced reporter whom you know and trust through previous meetings. But the commander who has little media experience should keep the information officer present, at least at the first meeting with any particular reporter. His presence can be beneficial in several ways. Besides being a witness to what was (and wasn't) said, he is a source for information which may have slipped your mind; and he also provides, through his presence, a certain amount of psychological support. Finally, if he is an experienced information officer, he may on a *rare* occasion interrupt to clarify something you have said. If this ever happens, listen to him. You need not take his advice. If you don't like what he did, you can always chew him out after the interview, or even fire him. But at the time, listen to him, because he has heard you say something he thinks will get you into deep trouble and he is attempting to modify it into something innocuous. And he could be right, you know. Normally he sits, unobtrusively, on a chair placed for him in a corner of your office, quiet as the proverbial mouse.

Eventually the reporter will begin asking questions. Show interest and listen very carefully to each question, not only to catch the full intent of the reporter, but also to spot certain types of questions which can prove troublesome if not modified. Among these are:

1. *The hypothetical question:* "What if . . . ?" Decline to answer hypothetical questions. It is too easy for the hypothetical premise to become an anticipated outcome when the story is printed.

2. *The faulty premise question:* "As everyone knows . . . " If you do not agree with the premise upon which the question is based, say so.

3. *The leading question:* "Then you agree that . . . ?" If you do not agree, tell him so.

4. *The "me-too" question.* This type of question is preceded by a series of reporter comments with which you agree, followed in logical sequence by one with which you also agree, but would not want to do so publicly. Example: "I know you agree we should maintain a strong defense posture." (Yes) "I think you join me in feeling this is no time to let down our guard." (Yes) "Then surely you will agree that the President's recent decision to cut the defense budget by three quarters is stupid." (Yes, but you would be even more stupid to agree publicly.) Think before you express an opinion.

5. *A double question.* You have to separate the two parts in order to properly answer the question, since they require different answers.

6. *Putting words in your mouth.* "In other words, what you are saying is. . . . " If what he has you saying is not precisely what you mean to say, correct him.

The appearance of these types of questions and comments do not mean the reporter is trying to trap you or lead you into a verbal indiscretion. They often appear inadvertently and innocently, but whether contrived or accidental, they can spell trouble, since they lead to damaging answers.

As you receive the questions, be sure they are routed along the correct channel. They should go from your ear to your brain. The brain then considers the question and reaches into that file cabinet for a suitable answer, and it will find it there at least ninety percent of the time if you have adequately prepared for the interview. The brain takes the response, modifies it to precisely fit the question, and sends it on to the mouth. As the mouth answers, the brain must stay engaged in order to keep the mouth from rambling on in the wrong direction once the question is answered. Talk away from areas you wish to avoid, into areas you want to cover. A properly engaged brain also recognizes opportunities to introduce those two or three items you wanted to get across as you answer the questions. If these can be casually dropped into the conversation, their impact is greater than if they were introduced as separate, obviously prepared, subjects.

Before we leave the ear-brain-mouth sequence, it should be noted that public officials have an alarming tendency to answer press questions without apparent reference to the brain. When this occurs another piece of the anatomy comes into play, a foot. It goes into the mouth. And once inserted, it is very difficult to get it out.

The Post-Interview

If you have properly prepared for the interview, no question takes you by surprise. The discussion proceeds amiably in a relaxed atmosphere as you get across what you want to say and the reporter gathers a good, positive story. Eventually the time allocated for the interview dwindles away, but you are not the one to call attention to it, since (apparently at least) you are so engrossed in the interview you have lost track of time. The information officer, if present, can be the designated timekeeper, but a better technique is to have your secretary tap on the door and announce that your driver is waiting.

Immediately everyone's attention is diverted to the clock, and when you have finished answering the current question, the interview breaks up. You accompany the reporter to the door and, maintaining the parent-child relationship, tell him how much you have enjoyed talking with him and express the hope that you will see him again. Then as you wish his son, Tim, the best of luck at his next game, the information officer takes him out to his car or whatever form of transportation he is using.

And so ends the interview, unless .... Remember, you still have an extra half hour set aside on your schedule. If the interview went particularly well from your point of view, or if you still have some things you want to get across, you can offer to extend the interview beyond the allotted time. Properly done, this offer is very flattering to a young reporter, since he is aware of your busy schedule. This technique is easily overdone, however. It should be used sparingly.

After the information officer escorts the reporter to his transportation and exchanges with him the niceties of the occasion, he returns to his office and prepares his notes covering the interview. Then, at your convenience, he returns to your office and goes over them with you. What did the reporter ask and what were your answers? They need not be word for word; a summary is sufficient. You can call his attention to something he left out, but be sure you never tell him to change anything. If he thought you said something, the chances are the reporter heard the same thing, whether you thought you said it or not.

Contrary to common assumptions, the primary purpose of these notes is not to prove you did not say what the reporter quotes you as saying, although they can be used for this. Rather, they become a record of the interview which you can review prior to giving an interview to subsequent reporters (to assure consistency) or before seeing the same reporter on another occasion.

Recalling something a reporter said several months previously cannot help but impress him with your sharpness.

There was a time when the information officer's notes were typed as memorandums for record and neatly filed. They still are in some cases. However, note that these files become official files and susceptible to being retrieved by competitive news agencies under the Freedom of Information Act. It is extremely unlikely that such a memorandum would be called for, but the fact that it might be has led many officials to leave the record in personal, handwritten form.

In sum, a little preparation and a lot of common sense will get you through the traditional print media interview. Now for an especially challenging type of press encounter: the electronic media.

Chapter IV
The Electronic Media

Traditional print media has had to give considerable ground grudgingly to the two new kids on the block: radio and television. No longer do newspapers run "extra" editions to announce sudden breaking news. By the time the presses are warmed up, radio and television have already reported it. Of course, neither of the newcomers can offer the depth and breadth of news coverage provided by newspapers and magazines; yet a deplorable number of Americans rely solely on radio and television for their information of the world at large. Television in particular has become increasingly influential in the shaping of public opinion.

Radio

Here we cover radio only briefly, since much of what is discussed under television applies equally to radio. Just think of radio as television without the picture. However, there are a couple of considerations applying particularly to radio which deserve our attention.

The Telephone Interview. Due to limited budgets, radio stations make extensive use of the telephone interview which is broadcast live or recorded for subsequent broadcast. The interviewer is expected to make it clear that the conversation will be broadcast; and to further protect the parties involved, the law requires a distinct beeping tone to be audible whenever a telephone call is

being recorded. That bleeping can be the audio equivalent of a staring television lens in striking terror in the hearts of the uninitiated.

There is nothing wrong with granting a telephone interview to a radio reporter, providing you have prepared for it just like any other interview. However, it is not wise to accept telephone calls from radio stations (or any other news agency, for that matter) during breaking news situations. In the first place, you are usually much too busy at such times to be taking any telephone calls. Secondly, the pressures of such occasions and the uncertainties surrounding breaking news conspire to create an environment which is most conducive to foot-in-the-mouth answers. When things appear to be falling apart, let your information personnel handle the telephone queries.

The Call-in Radio Program. A popular type of radio program features a guest who answers on-the-air questions which are phoned in during the broadcast. Normally the guest sets the stage by presenting a brief introduction to the subject at hand. The program is live, of course, and except for a five-second delay to bleep out obscenities, the questions are live and unscreened. They can range from the thoughtful to the naive, from the subtle to the brutal, from the easy to the difficult. Some are not questions at all, but rather editorials.

Whether or not you agree to appear on such a program should depend (as it does in the case of television) on the program itself and the subject matter. Programs designed to disseminate information (upcoming events, community affairs) may provide worthwhile opportunities to get your message to the public. On the other hand, if the program is based upon controversy—and many such programs are, since controversy is much more exciting than plain old information—then you should think twice before accepting the invitation. You, obviously, are going to be the center of the controversy

of the day, and you will be spending your air time dodging. Even though you are an artful dodger, it can be a trying experience. How do you respond to a caller who asks if the new Jaguar you have hidden in your garage was bought with the under-the-table money you received from a big defense contractor? The whole thing is untrue, of course. You deny it, of course. Most listeners believe you, of course. But do they all? Of course not.

Television

Experience counts a lot in turning in a good television performance. It would be advantageous if you could avoid that first television appearance entirely and make your screen debut on the second, third, or fourth appearance. In essence it is a question of getting used to being stared at by that cold, hard, probing eye known as the camera lens. But if its initial stare cannot be avoided, at least it can be softened somewhat by spending a few minutes in front of a home video camera. It also helps to realize that just about everyone is nervous his first time

on television—and his second, third, and subsequent times too, for that matter. It is much like the fear a leader feels on a battlefield. The task at hand is not to avoid the fear (or nervousness), but rather not to show it, and the latter is much easier to accomplish than the former. Indeed, a measure of nervousness is not a bad thing to carry along on a television appearance, since it makes the adrenalin flow and this, in turn, keeps you alert.

The rest is easy. It is just a question of knowing your job, abiding by a few rules, being aware of the procedures, and getting yourself prepared. Obviously the preparation will depend upon the type and length of appearance for which you are preparing. It should follow the steps outlined in Chapter III under "Preparing for the Interview" and include a review of the rules unique to television, which we are about to discuss. But we offer these rules, or guides, with an important caveat: adapt them to your natural manner and inclination; never hesitate to modify them, or ignore them, if they do not fit. For example, one of the rules tells us to "smile when on camera," and for most people most of the time, it is a good rule. But if you are an individual with a poker face who almost never smiles, a contrived smile for the camera usually turns out to resemble a silly smirk or an idiotic grin. The situation (a tragic occurrence for example) can also make anyone who smiles look like an insensitive fool. So take these rules with a grain of salt. Adapt them to work for you until you have developed your own particular style. Once you have successfully done that, forget the rules.

Before contemplating a list of television "do's" and "don'ts," consider some of the major types of television appearances a military officer or public official is likely to encounter. Many of the "rules" are incorporated into the discussion—but not all of them. Read the rules section too.

FROM A RELIABLE SOURCE . . .

An Army colonel from Washington, D.C. was on a lecture tour in a southern city. He was invited to a television studio for a brief interview to be aired on the evening news. The interviewer, an attractive young lady named Molly, agreed to ask him the questions he suggested, which were designed to publicize the lecture series. She wrote the questions on her note pad, but during their preliminary chat before the taping, the notes got misplaced. Once the on-camera introductions had been accomplished, she glanced down at her notes and found nothing. But Molly did not panic. With the casual aplomb of a veteran television personality, she reached up and pulled a question right out of the air. "Colonel," said she, "what do you think of the plan to abolish the draft and rely exclusively on an all-volunteer army?" The colonel had some real hard thoughts on the all-volunteer military concept, but since he was not ready to resign or retire at that particular time, prudence dictated this was neither the time nor place to express those thoughts. But the camera was running. Molly was waiting for an answer. The colonel took a deep breath and said, "Come on now, Molly, that isn't what you agreed to ask me!"

The taping stopped. Off camera the colonel explained why he was in no position to answer that particular question. Molly apologized, found her misplaced notes, and started the interview over. In this case it was an innocent mistake, a case of misplaced notes, but even had the question not been innocent, the colonel's response would never have been aired. Television reporters may discuss, prior to an interview, what questions will be asked, but they are not anxious to share with their viewers the fact that they do so.

If you must interrupt a taped interview, this is the way to do it. But, remember, it doesn't work with live television or in cases of fast-breaking news.

The News Clip. A common, and perhaps most likely, occasion for a public official to appear on television

involves a short news item concerning something he has done or is about to do: a visit by a military officer to a city to deliver a speech, a new development in the area of the official's expertise, an upcoming event in which the interviewee will play a key role, and so forth. This type of interview is normally a stand-up interview, positive, and brief. It may be held in a television studio, or it may be accomplished by a mobile TV unit at an airport or in your office. Not to be confused with an ambush interview, the news clip interview should be regarded as an opportunity to let the public know what you are doing, a chance to render a positive report to your stockholders, so to speak.

Now remember, that news clip is going to have to vie with all the other news of the day for a slot on the evening report, and these time slots are few in number and short in time. No matter how long and charmingly you speak, the time available for your eloquence is measured in seconds. If your message is less than earthshaking and over ten or fifteen seconds long, it is likely to be left out entirely. Yes, what we are talking about here is the infamous "sound bite." So prepare what you are going to say beforehand, keep it down to a few sentences, and get your key points right up front.

Review the rules, check and double-check your personal appearance, and meet the interviewer with friendly confidence. The interviewer, normally an attractive young person diligently climbing the ladder to anchor fame and fortune, will introduce himself (or herself). Smile, shake hands, express pleasure over the meeting, then go over and shake hands with the camera crew. The crewmembers will find this flattering, and surprising too, since most people ignore them. It is a nice gesture, and besides, it never hurts to be nice to someone pointing a camera at you.

The interviewer will explain the setup: how things work, where you are to stand, the direction you should face. Listen. You may be an old hand at this and

know all about it, but listen anyway. It is the polite thing to do, and you might even learn something.

When he has finished the setup briefing, ask the interviewer what he is going to ask you on camera. Contrary to popular belief, he will most likely tell you. He will tell you because he wants the interview to go well. This is a positive interview and the better you appear, the more likely you both are to make the evening newscast. So he will tell you, and if you prefer modified or different questions, tell him so. In all probability he will welcome your suggestion and modify his questions accordingly. After all, he is seeking the same thing you are: a comfortable launch pad for your remarks.

As the interview proceeds, smile, stand up straight, but remain relaxed, and keep your head up and your eyes steady. Look at the interviewer, NOT at the camera. Gesture as appropriate, but keep your hands at shoulder level. Talk slowly and use words the television audience can understand. Call the interviewer by name (first name) and if you are visiting his city, say something nice about it—a comment about a recent success of the local athletic team is always welcome.

When the interview is over, don't just rush off. Take time to say goodbye. And be cordial. You may well meet again someday, and you will find, in fair weather and foul, it is easier to deal with media personnel who like and respect you.

The Non-controversial Talk Show. The non-controversial talk show offers public officials excellent opportunities to reach the public. Dedicated to fulfilling TV stations' public service responsibilities, these programs normally address community concerns and local interests. Public officials are frequently invited to publicize upcoming events, to explain problems, or simply to familiarize people with who they are and what they are doing. The hosts almost never adopt a hostile or probing posture. Rather, their job is to provide the foundation

for the guest's remarks and to keep the program moving along at an interesting pace.

FROM A RELIABLE SOURCE . . .

During a prerecorded television debate between candidates running for public office in the deep south, one of the candidates used the word "damn." It would probably have gone unnoticed, except for the fact the station, which backed the opposing candidate, "bleeped out" the offending word when the program was aired. This left it up to the viewers to substitute any four letter word they chose to fill the blank. The candidate lost the election, and there were those who blamed his defeat on an overactive public imagination.

Watch what you say on television (or radio). A "bleep" can make matters worse than they really are.

Before appearing on such a program, you should familiarize yourself with the procedures and type of questions you can expect by watching or reviewing a tape of one of the programs. You will note that more time is available than for a spot news appearance, and therefore you should allocate more time for preparation. In fact, you should cover all the steps outlined in the section on "Preparing for an Interview."

Arrive at the studio early for the taping session so you can spend some time with the TV host prior to going on camera. This is the time to establish rapport, discuss the questions to be asked, and outline what you hope to get across so the host can plan the questioning accordingly. This is also the time to point out any subject you do not want to talk about, carefully explaining why you wish to avoid that particular topic area. This is something you should avoid if at all possible because nothing arouses journalistic curiosity and suspicion more than a forbidden subject. Indeed, your request might well be refused, in which case you have two choices, both of them bad: (1) Refuse to appear on the

program and have your absence explained and commented on publicly, or (2) appear as scheduled and spend the program fending off questions you hoped to avoid.

FROM A RELIABLE SOURCE . . .

The owner of a large oil refinery which had been accused of polluting a nearby waterway was invited to appear on a local television program to discuss the international oil situation. He agreed to appear only if the host of the program would agree not to ask him about the waterway pollution. The host agreed, and true to his word, he did not ask about the polluted waterway. But he opened the program by announcing the agreement and then asked his guest why he didn't want to talk about the pollution.

Never ask a media interviewer to avoid a subject unless there is a very good reason for it, a reason you can state publicly. If you have skeletons in your closet, beware of invitations to appear on television for any reason.

Prior to the taping, you will probably be shown the studio and briefed on procedure. There you find two movable cameras, manned by individuals trailing wires from earphones. Cables lead back from the cameras. Both cameras are continually taking pictures, but the recordings of only one at a time are transmitted. The camera images are carried back to two screens appearing before an individual who is perched in a position of grand overview where he deftly orchestrates the proceedings. It is he who directs the camera personnel, selects which camera image goes out over the airways, and programs commercial breaks. To let everyone know which camera is the live one, a small light (usually red) glows beneath the lens of the camera being transmitted. As the switch is activated to change over to the other camera, the light goes out and a similar one on the other camera lights up. These camera switching procedures can be the downfall of the uninitiated. Just because the live camera

is pointed in another direction does not mean you can scratch an itchy nose with impunity, as many an unwary subject has discovered. That dead camera is but a flick of a finger away from being alive.

Another feature of a television studio is the monitor. It is normally a standard television set tuned to the station channel and set off to one side where it can be seen by those being televised. If you are not sure but what your toupee has slipped or your mascara has run, a quick glance at the monitor will reassure you (or confirm your worst fears). But take care to make your glances at the monitor casual and brief. Staring at the monitor,

either in dismay or delight, can detract from the image you hope to project.

For most talk shows you will be seated, perhaps with a table in front of you. Watch your posture. Sit up straight, but stay relaxed. Do not sit at attention (an indication of nervousness), but don't relax to the point of slouching down toward the horizontal either (an indication of a nervous individual trying to appear nonchalant). It is a good idea to keep both feet flat on the floor. If you are a man who likes to cross his legs, it is wise to wear long socks to hide shiny shins. And do not scratch your ankles. Generally, women are more poised on television; but, ladies, unless you are modeling bathing suits, be sure and keep your knees covered.

As you talk, let your facial expressions punctuate your speech, smile, use your hands, lean forward to emphasize the points you have to make. An animated delivery is much more convincing than a wooden one; enthusiasm is contagious.

Call your host by name and get him to identify with any project or upcoming event you wish to publicize. This is important, for the viewing audience tends to identify with popular television personalities, and they will buy the product you are selling more readily if the host indicates his approval.

Keep your eyes steady and your head up. Look at the host and maintain eye contact when you speak. Stay alert and attentive. If there are other guests on the program, be polite to them. Do not monopolize the conversation, but take your fair share of it. The host will normally assist in this. As you respond to the host's questions, don't forget to work in those preplanned things you want to get across.

As noted earlier, you should not look at the camera, but rather at the one who is asking the questions. But there are exceptions to this rule. Direct appeals to the viewing public may be made looking straight into the camera lens, making sure you are talking to the live camera—" Come and visit us on Armed Forces Day," or

"Please cooperate in getting the litter off public streets." Another situation in which direct talk to the camera might be appropriate is when the host deliberately misconstrues your answers. After a few patient corrections, you might want to direct your answers to the audience. But this technique should be used sparingly for it is fraught with danger. In effect, what you are doing is saying to the audience, "This person is too stupid to understand what I am saying, so I will talk directly to you." Needless to say, this angers the host (who is bound to have the last word), and it may well alienate the viewers.

Finally, assuming all went well, don't forget to send a thank-you note back to the host a day or two after the program has been aired.

The Press Conference. The press conference is used to announce really important news of a type generating wide interest which multiple news organizations would want to cover. Unless the item is truly significant, it is best handled by a press release issued by the information office. There is one more requirement too: You must have significant rank, stature, or position to attract media representatives to a press conference.

Assuming you can attract the press and really do have something to say, the news conference holds the edge over a simple news release because it generates more attention and assures that any questions raised by the announcement can be answered on the spot. But be careful on your timing. If the media are notified too late, not everyone will show up. On the other hand, too much lead time between notification and the conference risks early discovery of the news by enterprising reporters. Few public tasks are as deflating as having to formally announce news that is already out.

The administrative details of conducting a press conference should be left up to information personnel, but be sure they have sufficient time and resources to accomplish the task. The conference should be held

indoors, in an area large enough to accommodate the media representatives, and sufficiently isolated from other activities to preclude noise intrusion. A hanger adjacent to a busy runway is no place to hold a press conference. Telephones should be available for print reporters, and there should be sufficient electric outlets to service the lights and cameras of the television crews. And those crews must be given enough time to set up before the conference. Reporters should be provided seats (a seated audience is better behaved), but you should stand.

FROM A RELIABLE SOURCE . . .

There was once a secretary of one of the military services who liked to hold press conferences to announce inconsequential achievements. The Pentagon press corps soon realized the situation, and attendance at his press conferences dwindled down to the point where public affairs officers were hard pressed to round up any reporters at all. But the secretary had a resourceful staff who realized he didn't really know that many correspondents. Toward the end of his tenure, the secretary was making press announcements to an attentive group of note takers who were not remotely connected to the media.

Do not call a press conference unless you have something worthwhile to announce.

The podium should be on a stage or raised platform in order to provide you with a clear view of the audience and assure the television cameras an unobstructed line of sight. The raised position also provides a small psychological dividend by locating you on a higher level than your questioners.

Your announcement should be short and to the point, if possible no longer in length than one typewritten page. Long announcements have to be rewritten and condensed for either printing or broadcasting. Rewrites can easily miss key points, or at least the key points as

far as you are concerned. So keep the announcement brief.

The announcement should be typed or printed and handed out to the reporters as they arrive for the press conference. Normally they are embargoed until the announcement is officially made or until the hour of the news conference. An embargo is merely a statement appearing at the top of the sheet stating that the information is not to be publicized prior to a certain time. Media representatives will almost always abide by reasonable embargoes, but don't expect an embargo to hold up over a period of days.

Preprinted announcements accomplish several things: they assure that reporters get the announcements right, they relieve reporters from having to take notes during the actual announcement, they assure a uniformity of dissemination, and they give the reporters a chance to formulate pertinent questions in advance. But they also place a restriction on you, the announcer. You must ensure that what you announce at the podium is exactly what is written on the handout. In other words, READ the announcement word for word. Nothing is more confusing to a reporter than to receive a handout and then have an official get up and say something else. Which is correct? The written sheet? What was said? Something in between? Unavoidable confusion among the media is bad enough; confusion caused by you is unforgivable.

The information officer should have the media representatives assembled at the appointed time, or a bit before if he has any ground rules to announce. You should appear precisely on time, walk to the podium, greet the reporters, and without further ado or comment, read the announcement. Few of your audience will be looking at you. Rather they will be reading along with you to see that you do not deviate from the script. When you have finished, look up, smile, and invite questions.

Some officials like to call for the questions themselves, and some are very good at it. Most are not. Unless there is but a handful of reporters and you are

acquainted with them all, it is far better to let the information officer choose who will ask the next question. He knows the reporters better than you do (or at least he should) and is thus better able to control the tempo and mood of the gathering. Also, any unhappiness reporters may have over not being recognized is directed at the information officer rather than you. Absorption of press unhappiness is part of his job.

All this is accomplished by having the information officer appear on the stage with you, but off to one side. When you have finished reading the announcement, he asks that reporters raise their hands to be recognized, stand to ask their questions, and limit themselves to one question at a time to provide everyone a chance to be heard. Hands go up. He chooses a reporter, if possible calling him by name so that you can also call him by name, if you choose, when you deliver the answer. The information officer then turns to you, and he keeps his eyes on you as you speak.

Listen carefully to each question, looking directly at the questioner as he talks, and maintain eye contact with him as you answer. Keep your answers as brief as possible—this is not the time to deliver a speech—and when you have finished, turn back to the information officer. He immediately raises his hand and calls on another reporter.

The practice of allowing reporters a follow-up question has its pros and cons, mostly cons so far as you are concerned. Reporters like the idea. But follow-up questions can turn into harangues against your initial answer, and there is a reluctance on the part of some reporters to give up the floor once they have it. The practice also draws down on the time available for others to ask questions, which is reason enough to avoid it. But there is also another reason. If you do not choose to answer a question fully, you can often avoid doing so by providing a partial answer and moving on to the next question. Even when your answer leaves you open for a follow-up question, the next reporter called upon will

almost always have his own question to ask and will not accommodate his unsatisfied colleague who is left waving his hand in vain. Of course, you should not overdo this. If your partial response strays too far afield, your evasion will draw attention to the topic you wish to avoid and you will soon find yourself deeply enmeshed in it. Also, if the group of reporters is small, that frustrated questioner will get another crack at you anyway.

The end of the interview can be established in various ways: after a predetermined length of time, after a certain number of questions have been asked, when the questions start becoming repetitious, when you grow tired of answering questions and pass a signal to the information officer. Or perhaps the reporters simply run out of questions. Except in the latter case, the information officer signals the end of the conference by announcing, "This will be the last question." He, rather than you, should make this announcement. He then calls for the last question. When you have answered it, thank everyone for coming, smile and walk off the stage. DO NOT respond to any further questions. DO NOT walk through the throng of reporters to make your exit. Remember, the cameras will follow you as you walk off, so maintain your composure until you are well clear of the gathering.

The Television Debate. There is one type of television program which should be approached—if approached at all—with great caution. It is any program which features disagreement among participants. These offerings normally contain in their titles such words as debate, forum, discussion, or similar terms. There is nothing wrong with these programs. Indeed, they are usually worthwhile, since they focus public attention on the issues of the day, clarify, and educate. But the messages they provide are crafted by experts, experts not only in the subject matter at hand, but also experts in the art of television debate.

In this imperfect world of modern electronic persuasion, the "good guys" do not always win. Reason, experience, logic, and expertise do not always carry the day. Rather, the victory goes to the individual most adept at television debate, the most convincing (and attractive) to the television audience. Some public officials are very accomplished television debaters, and these individuals should by all means embrace this type of television program. But the average military commander and public official are better off declining invitations to take part in television debates. If by chance you do appear on this type of program—your appearance dictated, perhaps, by higher authority or unrestrained ego—then remember these guidelines:

1. First review the program on which you are going to appear to familiarize yourself with the questioning technique, moderator's idiosyncrasies, camera techniques, etc.

2. Review the subject to be discussed and be sure you are familiar with both sides of the issues likely to be raised. Go over the points you want to make and the arguments likely to be put forth in rebuttal. Anticipated questions are much more easily and smoothly answered than those which take you by surprise.

3. Be polite. Never disparage your opponent or ridicule his point of view—otherwise, the viewing audience will join him in opposing you.

4. Never show anger or impatience. Do not interrupt.

5. Never raise your voice. Speak distinctly and slowly. If interrupted, stop talking until your detractor quiets down, then go on with what you were saying. Never react to interruptions or other questions until you have finished talking, but don't drag out your answers—get to the point.

6. Listen closely to what is being said. It can keep you from making stupid mistakes. And when you are listening intently, it makes you look intelligent. In television debate, looking intelligent is almost as important as being intelligent.

7. After responding to an opponent's question, ask one of him. And if he will let you get away with it, ask him another before he asks one of you. The idea is to keep him on the defensive, always reacting to you.

8. If there are two or more of you on a side, nod your head in agreement as your colleague is making a point. The gesture can be contagious. The audience may join you. A shaking of the head when your opponent has the floor can have the same effect, but it is also impolite and this can turn the viewers against you.

9. The "stampeding introductory phrase" is often used in television debate. It prefaces a point you want to make. For example: "As every patriotic American knows. . . . " or "All intelligent citizens are in agreement that. . . . " Since the vast majority of television audiences think of themselves as both intelligent and patriotic, they tend to adopt the view being proffered without challenge. For best effect this technique should be used sparingly, and you should ever be alert to your opponent's use of it. It is easily countered by remarking that all the intelligent, patriotic Americans you know think otherwise. One enterprising victim of an "everyone knows . . . " statement asked his opponent if he was conducting his opinion polls at the local lunatic asylum.

10. A sense of humor can be a most effective ally during a television debate. Yet it must be restrained. Never debase or belittle an opponent, no matter how clever or humorous the humbling retort may seem. Keep the humor light and chiding, subtle and free of mockery. And if your opponent scores a humorous point at your

expense, you need not join in the laughter, but at least smile and accept it with good grace.

In preparing to meet the press from the various media, you might want to use a technique with which you, as a defense manager, are probably already familiar: the check list. The next chapter presents several specific check lists compiled for the benefit of both the novice and the veteran.

Chapter V
Conner's Commandments and Some Check Lists

The Commandments

1. Never fear the press. But recognize its power and get it to work for you.
2. Know the rules of engagement and understand the pressures influencing reporters.
3. Know and use your public information resources.
4. With media representatives, be friendly but wary, candid but cautious, outgoing but careful.
5. Carefully prepare for upcoming media encounters.
6. Get to know a reporter before you meet him by learning all you can about him and reviewing his work.
7. If confronted by hostile reporters, remain calm. Never raise your voice or show anger.
8. Remember, on television, your appearance is as important as your words. You are the message as well as the messenger.
9. Review the appropriate check lists before a public media encounter.
10. Don't take yourself too seriously.

General Check List

_____ Do your subordinates and staff members know your policies regarding the public media?

_____ Are your plans for handling emergencies up to date and do they include the dissemination of information to the public?

_____ Do your emergency plans allocate adequate resources to support the dissemination of information?

_____ In regard to the Information Officer:

a. Does he know his job?

b. Does he understand what you expect of him?

c. Does he understand his parameters (degree of independence) when dealing with media representatives?

d. Does he have ready access to you at all times?

e. Are his activities fully integrated with the overall staff effort?

f. Are the reports he submits up through information channels coordinated with operational reports?

Interview Check List

Before

_____ Find out all you can about the reporter. Read some of the things he has written.
_____ Determine two or things you want to get across to the public. Practice narrating them.
_____ Anticipate all possible questions which could be asked. Prepare answers.
_____ Identify subjects you want to avoid and subjects you want to discuss.
_____ Assure information officer knows part he is to play.
_____ Discuss the upcoming interview with the information officer and anyone else who might provide appropriate advice.
_____ Assure physical layout of meeting place is satisfactory: chairs, coffee tables, etc.
_____ Determine time limits for interview; make arrangements for smooth termination at proper time.
_____ Collect any references you may need during interview.

During

_____ Give reporter a warm welcome.
_____ Assure no barrier (desk) is between you and reporter.
_____ Establish proper atmosphere early in interview.
_____ Be conscious of your eye contact.
_____ Listen carefully to questions; think before you answer.
_____ Keep your answers simple, direct, and understandable.
_____ Be relaxed, friendly, confident. Stay alert. Exhibit strength, thoughtfulness, and sincerity.

_____ Don't forget those two or three things you want to get across to the public.
_____ Watch reporter's expression to gauge his reaction to your responses.
_____ At end of interview, bid the reporter a warm goodby.

After

_____ Review what was said with information officer.
_____ Assure any notes taken during interview are properly safeguarded.
_____ Assure information officer follows up on providing any additional information promised during interview.
_____ Review, evaluate, and have filed the article prompted by the interview.
_____ Have information officer bring any significant errors in the article to the attention of reporter or editor.

Hostile Press Encounter Check List

_____ Do you really need to meet with these hostile reporters, or can your information officer handle it?

_____ Is there an elevated position for you to take when you address the reporters?

_____ Is your preliminary statement clear and concise, and does it carry the most important points you want to make right up front?

_____ As you meet these hostile reporters, remember:

a. Stay calm, keep your temper, do not raise your voice or show impatience.

b. Keep your eyes steady and on the one whose question you are answering.

c. Do not be distracted. If interrupted, stop talking until distraction subsides.

d. Your demeanor should reflect the seriousness of the situation.

e. Tell the truth; don't guess; avoid surmising.

f. Treat all reporters equally in providing information.

g. Make sure additional information gets to press as it becomes available.

h. Take the blame; give credit to subordinates.

Press Conference Check List

_____ Do you really have something worthwhile to say, something important enough to justify dissemination by way of a press conference?
_____ Have all interested news organizations been notified of time and place well in advance?
_____ Are the facilities adequate? (seating, place for cameras, electrical outlets, telephones, etc.)
_____ Is your announcement clear, concise, unambiguous?
_____ If announcement handouts are used, are there enough of them and are embargo times clearly stated?
_____ Have procedural rules have established with the reporters prior to your appearance?
_____ Is your information officer prepared for the part he is to play?
_____ Have arrangements been made to terminate conference at the proper time?
_____ At the conference, remember:

a. Start on time.
b. If copies of the announcement have been provided prior to the conference, read the announcement word for word.
c. Answer questions briefly but fully.
d. After answering last question, thank everyone for coming and depart without answering any more questions.
e. Be aware that microphones and cameras stay on after the termination of the conference.

A Television Check List

_____ Prepare yourself thoroughly for the interview. Anticipate questions.
_____ Check your appearance, then double-check and check again.
_____ If you have a heavy beard, shave just prior to leaving for the studio.
_____ Go easy on the jewelry. It can detract.
_____ If in civilian clothes, wear medium shade or pastel colors.
_____ Don't wear glasses that darken under bright light.
_____ Button civilian jackets if standing; unbutton them when seated.
_____ Arrive early at the studio to meet with your host and check out procedures.
_____ Be aware of your posture: If seated, don't lounge. Keep both feet on the floor. Sit toward the front of your chair, relaxed but erect. If standing, stand up straight.
_____ Smile when appropriate. Facial expression is important.
_____ Keep your hands in view. Use them to emphasize points, but keep your gestures at shoulder level.
_____ Keep your head up, eyes wide open and steady.
_____ When you talk, look at the host, not at the camera.
_____ Don't stare at the monitor.
_____ Never show anger or impatience or disgust.
_____ Be enthusiastic, but never get excited.
_____ Occasionally shift your position slightly. The act of changing is relaxing, and it keeps you from looking stiff.
_____ Pay very close attention. This makes you look intelligent and can keep you from stumbling into traps.
_____ Assume all cameras and all microphones are live.
_____ Don't ramble. Keep your answers brief and your main points up front.

_____ Speak slowly and clearly. Use words the audience can understand.

_____ Call your host by name. Try to get him to identify with upcoming events you wish to publicize.

_____ If the host thanks you for appearing on the program, reciprocate by expressing your pleasure at having the opportunity.

Appendix: Understanding the Role of the Press

Just about all government officials embrace the concept of a free press, but they frequently find themselves condemning some of the practices which that freedom has spawned. Nagging questions arise: Just what is this charter of freedom so savagely the public media? When did they get it? Who gave it to them, and why? This discussion seeks to shed some light on these concerns. It is based on three questions, good ones, frequenty asked by military officers and public officials.

The Fourth Branch of Government

Why are the Public Media referred to as the Fourth Branch of Government? They appear downright anti-government to me.

The media has taken as its tasks three things: to inform, to educate, to entertain. By far the most important of these is to inform. This is so because the preservation of a democratic society depends, to a large extent, upon the ability of the media to just this.

For a democracy to function and endure, its system of government must provide periodic opportunities for the citizens to change their leaders freely or to confirm those already holding power. It must also provide the mechanism for a peaceful transfer of power when called for. Finally, for a democracy to work, its citizens must be continually

aware of what is going on so they can make the necessary substitutions in the ranks of their helmsmen, in a timely manner, when the ship of state strays off course.

Our Founding Fathers did a remarkable job of establishing a workable governmental system of balanced power, sensitive to the will of the people. And they set in motion a philosophy of public education to ensure an enlightened electorate. But they provided no organization to keep the people informed.

They didn't have to. One was already in place.

The American press was well established by the end of the Revolutionary War. Indeed, it had played no small part in the winning of that war. It was a rough, unsophisticated conglomeration of hand presses putting out irregular editions, published and largely written by those who owned and operated the presses. And a hard-nosed, independent, opinionated lot they were. But by and large, they were honest and fearless, and they told it as they saw it. They were credible and were not at all reluctant to commont on the conduct of public officials.

Here then was the necessary link between the government and the people, a skeptical people who had little use for authority, even authority they had elected. In order to convince these skeptics that their government was indeed performing as it should, the press was given free rein to scrutinize and report on the conduct of all government officials. And because it enjoyed complete freedom from government influence or control, it maintained its credibility, an all important credibility stemming entirely from the degree of freedom allowed the press. Realizing this, the Founding Fathers included in the Bill of Rights the phrase which remains to this day the foundation

of the American press charter: "Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech or of the press . . . ."

Thus, with the inclusion of those four short words in the First Amendment, the American press became the unofficial fourth branch of government, the Inspector General branch, so to speak, which reports back to its multiple bosses how the other three branches are doing. And in addition to reporting the good and the bad of officialdom, this fourth branch performs an importnat, and oftern overlooked, additional service: it discourages the temptation to abuse power.

And how has this unofficial branch of government worked out over the years? "Great," say its advocates. "The nation has grown and prospered and demonstrated for all the world the superiority of democracy over any other form of government. And a key feature of that democracy has been its free press." They have a point. You can't argue with success. But there have been problems.

Over the years both government and the public media have grown in size and complexity to enormities that would have boggled the minds of the Founding Fathers. Needless to say, the task of ferreting out wrongdoers and preventing evil has also become large and ever more difficult. Indeed, the prevention of evil is an awesome task, particularly when it includes the sub-task of determining what is evil; and in assuming this task the American press has obviously assumed a great deal of power—and raised some nagging questions over who is watching the watcher. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*

In actual practice the power of the press is not as formidable as it appears in theory, since it is significantly dissipated by the multiplicity of the

various organs that make up the mass media. Some of that power cancels itself out as competing publications line up on different sides of a given issue. But the very multiplicity of news outlets, which reduces the overall power of the press, also places that power in multiple hands, no all of which handle it with the wisdom and restraint it deserves.

Whether restrained or not, the probing for wrongdoers by the press can be a chilling experience for government officials, since in their eagerness to expose incompetence, reporters may unfairly taint the reputations of the innocent, the semi-innocent, and even the casual bystander. For various reasons the military professional tends to be particularly critical of the press and unusually susceptible to its attention. From his point of view the press does indeed appear at times to be working at cross-purposes with the government and the very people it serves. He questions it, confronts it, as well he should. But in

doing so, he should keep the following in mind: that a free press does indeed act as a fourth branch of government, and the American people show no inclination to change the arrangement. Like it or not, the military must deal with it as it is.

The experiences of societies operating with controlled media bear elegant testimony to the fact that, for all its imperfections, weaknesses, and warts, a free press performs its tasks better than any other institution thus far tried. In a sense it is like old age. Bad as it is to live with, it sure beats the alternative.

Press Responsibility

The public media obviously have a great deal of power, but no responsibility. If they are going to function as the public watch dog, shouldn't they be held responsible for what they do and say?

The First Amendment to the Constitution grants press freedom, but it says nothing about responsibility. Nor does it mention truth, or accuracy, or balance, or fairness. Was this not an oversight on the part of the founding fathers? It is a question that often comes up to haunt the military officer, particularly when that watchdog is nipping at his heels. Here he is, slaving away under a strict code of conduct, sworn to uphold the very documet which protects his antagonists and allows them to say anything they wish without being accountable to anyone! It just doesn't seem fair.

Perhaps it is unfair, but, no, it wasn't an oversight on the part of those who promulgated the Bill of Rights. Actually the problem has long been debated, and it is not just the military who would like to see the press exercise more responsibility. Even journalists are among those advocating greater responsibility, and a large number of them actively strive for it. But how can it be achieved? How do you enforce responsibility without tampering with freedom?

Perhaps there should be a media code of conduct, a press vesion of the Military Code of Justice, so to speak. But who would write the code, judge its violators, mete out punishment? Barring voluntary adherence, there would have to be a law to enforce it. But remember, "Congress shall make no law abridging freedom of speech or of the press. . . . "

But what about a panel of journalists, chosen by journalists, to judge journalists? And suppose all the media agreed to abide by the findings of this panel, thus negating the requirement for Congress to pass a law?

"No way," argue the media. "A regulatory body is a regulatory body, regardless of its composition, and it would have the potential to stifle press freedom."

Even a band of angels would be suspect. What about the voluntary submission by all the media to a set rules? It might happen in a perfect world, but then, in a perfect world we would have no need for regulatory bodies.

The media argument goes on to mention that the press is already regulated by the only body it recognizes as having jurisdiction over it: the American people. When, in the opinion of the public, a periodical gets out of line, people quit buying it. The same thing holds true for radio and television stations: they are turned off. And when this occurs the errant medium mends its ways or it dies. And here it should be noted that revenues derived from subscriptions to print media are relatively insignificant. The lion's share of newspaper income is provided by advertisers. But readership is still the key to survival, because advertising rates are set by circulation figures. The major television networks are entirely dependent upon advertising, and the Nielson ratings, which measure their respective audiences, govern what they charge advertisers—and are the major soruce of ulcers among television producers.

In view of the pressures exerted by public acceptance, the question arises: Do the public media lead public opinion or merely reflect it? The answer probably is: a certain amount of both. But how much of either provides a subject for lively and unresolvable debate. Indeed, it is quite possible for an individual to argue convincingly on both sides of the issue to two different audiences. To those who condemned our military involvement in Southeast Asia, journalists were known to take credit for turning the public against an unjust and unwinnable war. But when accused by the military of losing the war (for a time a favorite military accusation), those same journalists

could point out that the media was only reflecting the growing public doubts and frustrations over a war that was lasting too long and producing no results.

The publisher William Randolph Hearst proudly claimed credit for leading the American public into the Spanish American War, but newspapers before and after the heyday of William Randolph proved the folly of getting too far afield from the philosophy of their readers. Whenever this occurs, circulation figures drop. This ultimate sovereignty of the public over the media explains another question (complaint?) the military frequently voices: HOW COME *THE WASHINGTON POST* IS SO LIBERAL IN ITS OUTLOOK?

The Washington Post, while enjoying both national and international status, remains, basically, a hometown newspaper. That is, its constituency, so to speak, is the citizenry of Washington; and that citizenry is primarily liberal in its outlook. Consider if you will the comparative circulation of its more conservative rival. And there are those who consider the *Post* outright reactionary. Every now and then a given article will provoke two letters to the editor, one condemning the author's liberalism and the other attacking his conservative bias. Normally the paper prints them both to emphasize the wisdom of the old adage, "It all depends upon your point of view."

The First Amendment

Does the First Amendment really give a publisher the right to publish anything he wants regardless of truth or the harm he might cause?

The short answer is yes. The long answer is also yes, but along with it is the caveat that if he breaks a law, he can be held accountable. The matter was long ago summed up by the famous Eighteenth century

British jurist, Sir William Blackstone: "For the welfare of a society to thrive, it must have a free press. That is, the government should exert no prior constraints on what a newspaper publishes. However, this does not mean it has a license to libel. If it breaks a law, it must answer for it, just as a private citizen must."

This appears clear enough. Sensible. Definitive. But is it?

What if a government were to pass a law restricting what the media could legally say in the way of criticizing a government official and couple it with a devastating punishment? Even though no prior constraint existed, would not such a law effectively inhibit the press from criticizing the government? As a matter of fact, such a law provided the American press its first martyr.

In 1735 the American colonies were governed by English law, and one of those laws made it a crime to bring ridicule or discredit down upon a public official. It was called seditious libel, and it carried a heavy penalty. In that year a New York publisher by the name of Peter Zenger printed an article charging the British governor with corruption. The accusation was probably true, but truth had nothing to do with the law, and Zenger was hauled away to jail. When he was finally brought to trial, the jury was charged to determine, not whether the words printed were libelous (the judge had already ruled that they were), but rather whether or not Zenger had printed them. Since a copy of his papeer containing the offensive statement was introduced as evidence, the publisher's fate appeared sealed. The jury deliberated and returned its verdict: NOT GUILTY!

This defiance of the law was probably provoked more by a dislike of the British governor than by any

dedication to press freedom on the part of the colonial jury, but the journalists of the day, and their followers down through the years, regarded it as a public mandate. Nevertheless, the law remained in effect, and the newspapers and political tracts which encouraged and sustained the eventual revolution were printed in defiance of that law, often at considerable risk to their authors.

Once the struggle was over, our Founding Fathers, many of whom were among those rebel journalists, demonstrated their dedication to press freedom by including in the Bill of Rights a flat prohibition against Congressional tampering with the press. In 1787, Thomas Jefferson made his startling pronouncement, often quoted by the media, that "were it left for me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to choose the latter."

But the struggle over press freedom was not over. The next skirmish was but a few years off, and just beyond it was Jefferson's change of heart.

The American press which had been so supportive of the struggle for independence turned out to be less than unanimous in its support for the new government. As time went on and the Jeffersonian movement developed opposition to the federal government, its banners were carried by a group of publications that castigated Federalist leader Hamilton and even dared attack President Washington. He was called "treacherous," accused of being "twice a traitor," and said to have "discharged the loathings of a sick mind." By the time John Adams assumed the Presidency, the opposition press had become so vitriolic the Federalist legislatures passed the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798. The latter

made it a federal crime to write falsely or maliciously against the nation, the President, or Congress.

Federal judges took it from there, and soon a representative group of opposition editors were sitting in jail. But the battle lines were drawn. Jefferson claimed the law was unconstitutional, since it amounted to restricting through fear of retribution what the press could print. "Not so," argued its supporters. "Nothing precludes an editor from printing whatever he wishes. It merely holds him accountable, just as Blackstone said he should be held."

Over time, public opinion shifted on this and other issues to the side of the Jeffersonians, and in the next presidential election their champion was elected. The Alien and Sedition Acts were allowed to pass into history. But now the Federalist press demonstrated it could learn from its enemies. It took on President Jefferson in a no-holds-barred free-for-all that soon had him reeling. Explaining that hs repugnance of federal sedition laws did not extend to similar state laws currently in place, Jefferson arranged to have an offending editor, one Harry Croswell, tried for seditious libel under a New York state law. The trial, held in Hudson, New York, before a Jeffersonian court, attracted wide attention as it dragged on over several months and eventually drew none other than Alexander Hamilton into the defense of the accused. In this unlikely role, Hamilton was eloquent and persuasive, using many of the arguments that Jefferson himself had used in attacking the federal law. Truth, he maintained, was of vital consideration in the case of public libel. The court stood fast, however, and Croswell was found guilty. But it was a Pyrrhic victory for the Jeffersonians. No punishment was levied againt Croswell, and New York joined

other states in a rush to change their public libel laws to accommodate truth.

In his second inaugural address, Jefferson updated his opinion of newspapers by hurling a veiled threat at his antagonists. It is seldom quoted by the media.

"The artillery of the press has been leveled against us, charged with whatsoever its licentiousness could devise or dare. These abuses to an institution so important to freedom and science are deeply to be regretted, inasmuch as they tend to lessen its usefulness and to sap its safety."

With truth firmly established as a defense against accusations of libel in cases involving public officials, the media was able to publish justifiable criticism, however harsh, with impunity. And even on those occasions where accusations were only partially true, the practical politician seldom found it wise to wrestle out the facts in a public rehash of his conduct. But libel was libel, and even innocuous factual mistakes on the part of the press could, at the hands of a hostile court, lead to intimidating judgments. Such was the case of Sullivan vs. *The New York Times* which provoked a landmark decision by the Supreme Court. In reversing a lower court decision againt the newspaper, the Court said that in order to properly carry out its function as unihibited protector of the public good, the press should not be held liable for inaccurate accusations leveled at public figures, unless it could be shown that they were made with malice. In other words, an honest mistake on the part of the media was forgivable when the subject was a public figure.

Since that Supreme Court decision, few public officials have successfully sued a publication in a court of law. Several public officials, the most senior and

best known military one being General Westmoreland, have demonstrated the difficulty of proving both falsity and malice on the part of the offending news organization.

From the above we may profitably draw certain conclusions regarding freedom of the press:

First, the freedom enjoyed by the press is not set in concrete, for it is derived as much from the evolving interpretation of the First Amendment as from the amendment itself. But over the years public opinion, legislators, and the courts have generally leaned toward the side of the press whenever public officials confronted the press.

Second, public officials tend to develop harder feelings toward the media once they assume the responsibilities of office than those they held as private citizens. And the source of press criticism at any given time depends upon whose ox is being gored.

And finally (perhaps the most important for the military official), it doesn't pay for a public official to take on the media, particularly in a court of law.

About the Author

Judson J. Conner is a graduate of the United States Military Academy and the National War College and holds advanced degrees from the University of Florida in Journalism and the George Washington University in International Affairs. He served as a military information officer in Vietnam and was assigned to the Office of the Army Chief of Public Information during the Cuban missile crisis. During his thirty years as an Armor officer, he served five years as a public information officer and commanded every unit from platoon through brigade. For the past several years he has taught at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces and the National Defense University, where he developed and taught a course in media relations.

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This guide offers practical advice for you, the government official called on to "meet the press" in your duties. Although geared toward the defense manager, it will help anyone faced with dealing with the media.

Meeting the press shows you...

- what makes reporters tick
- how to use press ground rules to your advantages
- what to do about press errors
- how to get ready for interviews and other press encounters
- how to survive the press "ambush"
- how to "look good" in a TV or radio spot

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